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John the Baptist

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JOHN THE BAPTIST

BY

F. B. MEYER, B. A.

AUTHOR OF

"Paul: A Servant of Jesus Christ;" "Love to the Uttermost;" "Our Daily Homily."

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PREFACE

THE life and character of John the Baptist have always had a great fascination for me; and I am thankful to have been permitted to write this book. But I am more thankful for the hours of absorbing interest spent in the study of his portraiture as given in the Gospels. I know of nothing that makes so pleasant a respite from the pressure of life's fret and strain, as to bathe mind and spirit in the translucent waters of Scripture biography.

As the clasp between the Old Testament and the New—the close of the one and the beginning of the other; as among the greatest of those born of women; as the porter who opened the door to the True Shepherd; as the fearless rebuker of royal and shameless sin—the Baptist must ever compel the homage and admiration of mankind.

In many respects, such a life cannot be repeated. But the spirit of humility and courage; of devotion to God, and uncompromising loyalty to truth, which was so conspicuous in him, may animate us. We, also, may be filled with the spirit and power of Elijah as he was; and may point, with lip and life, to the Saviour of the world, crying, "Behold the Lamb of God."

F. B. Meyer.

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JOHN THE BAPTIST

I

The Interest of his Biography

"John, than which man a sadder or a greater
Not till this day has been of woman born;
John, like some iron peak by the Creator
Fired with the red glow of the rushing morn.

"This, when the sun shall rise and overcome it,
Stands in his shining, desolate and bare;
Yet not the less the inexorable summit
Flamed him his signal to the happier air."

F. W. H. Myers.

THE morning star, shining amid the brightening glow of dawn, is the fittest emblem that Nature can supply of the herald who proclaimed the rising of the Sun of Righteousness—answering across the gulf of three hundred years to his brother prophet, Malachi, who had foretold that sunrise and the healing of its wings.

Every sign attests the unique and singular glory of the Baptist. Not that his career was signalized by the blaze of prodigy and wonder, like the multiplication of the widow's meal or the descent of the fire of heaven

to consume the altar and the wood; for it is expressly said that John did "no miracle." Not that he owed anything to the adventitious circumstances of wealth and rank; for he was not a place-loving courtier, "clothed in soft raiment or found in kings' courts." Not that he was a master of a superb eloquence like that of Isaiah or Ezekiel; for he was content to be only "a cry"—short, thrilling, piercing through the darkness, ringing over the desert plains. Yet, his Master said of him that "among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist"; and in six brief months, as one has noticed, the young prophet of the wilderness had become the centre to which all the land went forth. We see Pharisees and Sadducees, soldiers and publicans, enthralled by his ministry; the Sanhedrim forced to investigate his claims; the petty potentates of Palestine caused to tremble on their thrones; whilst he has left a name and an influence that will never cease out of the world.

But there is a further feature which arrests us in the life and ministry of the Baptist. He was ordained to be "the clasp" of two covenants. In him Judaism reached its highest embodiment, and the Old Testament found its noblest exponent. It is significant, therefore, that through his lips the law and the prophets should announce their transitional purpose, and that he who caught up the torch of Hebrew prophecy with a grasp and spirit, unrivalled by any before him, should have it in his power and in his heart to say: "The ob-

ject of all prophecy, the purpose of the Mosaic law, the end of all sacrifices, the desire of all nations, is at hand." And forthwith turning to the True Shepherd, who stood at the door waiting to be admitted, to Him the porter opened, bowing low as He passed, and crying: "This is He of whom Moses in the law and the prophets did write, Jesus of Nazareth, who was for to come."

Few studies can bring out to clearer demonstrations the superlative glory of Christ than a thoughtful consideration of the story of the forerunner. They were born at the same time; were surrounded from their birth by similar circumstances; drank in from their earliest days the same patriotic aspirations, the same sacred traditions, the same glowing hopes. But the parallel soon stops. John the Baptist is certainly a grand embodiment of the noblest characteristics of the Jewish people. We see in him a conspicuous example of what could be developed out of eight hundred years of Divine revelation and discipline. But Jesus is the Son of Man: there is a width, a breadth, a universality about Him which cannot be accounted for save on the hypothesis, which John himself suggested, that He who cometh from above is above all.

In each case, life was strenuous and short—an epoch being inaugurated, in the one case in about six months, in the other some three years. *In each case,* at first, there was abounding enthusiasm, bursting forth around their persons as they announced the Kingdom of God,

like the flowers which carpet their own fair land after the rains; but side by side the unconcealed hatred of the religious world of their time. *In each case,* the brief sunny hours of service were soon succeeded by the rolling up of the thunderous clouds, and these by the murderous tempest of deadly hatred, even unto death: "Their dead bodies lay in the street of the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt." *In each case,* there was a little handful of detached disciples, who bitterly mourned their master's death, and took up the desecrated corpse to lay it in the tomb; whilst they that dwelt in the earth rejoiced and made merry, and sent gifts to one another, because they had been tormented by their words (Rev. xi. 10).

But there the parallel ends. The life purpose of the one culminated in his death; with the other, it only began. In the case of John, death was a martyrdom, which shines brilliantly amid the murky darkness of his time; in the case of Jesus, death was a sacrifice which put away the sin of the world. For John there was no immediate resurrection, save that which all good men have of their words and influence; but his Master saw no corruption—it was not possible for Him to be holden by it—and in his resurrection He commenced to wield his widest and fairest supremacy over human hearts and wills. When the axe of Herod's executioner had done its deadly work in the dungeons of Machaerus, the bond which knit the disciples of John was severed also, and they were absorbed in the followers of Christ; but

when the Roman soldiers thought their work was done, and the cry "It is finished!" had escaped the parched lips of the dying Lord, his disciples held together in the upper room, and continued there for more than forty days, until the descent of the Holy Spirit formed them into one of the strongest organizations that this world has ever beheld. John's influence on the world has diminished as men have receded further from his age; but Jesus is King of the ages. He creates, He fashions, He leads them forth; He is with us always, to the end of the age. We have not to go back through the centuries to find Him in the cradle or in Mary's arms, in the fishing-boat or on the mountain, on the cross or in the grave; He is *here* beside us, with us, in us, "all the days." John, then, was "a burning and shining torch," lifted for a moment aloft in the murky air; but Jesus was THAT LIGHT. As the starlight, which fails to illumine the page of your book or the dial-plate of your watch, is to the sunlight, as the courier is to the sovereign, as the streamlet is to the ocean—such was John as compared with Him whose shoe-latchet he felt himself unworthy to stoop down to unloose. Greatest born of women he might be; "sent from God" he was: but One came after him who bore upon his front the designation of his Divine origin and mission, behind whom the gates of the past closed as when a king has passed through, and at whose girdle hang the keys of the doors and gates of the Ages.

To read the calm idyllic pages of the Gospels, apart from some knowledge of contemporary history, is to miss one of their deepest lessons—that such piety and beneficence were set in the midst of a most tumultuous and perilous age. Those times were by no means favourable to the cultivation of the deepest life. The flock of God had long left the green pastures and still waters of outward peace, and were passing through the valley of death-shadow, every step of the path being infested by the enemies of their peace. The wolf, indeed, was coming. The national life was already being rent by those throes of agony which betokened the passing away of an age, and reached their climax in the Fall of Jerusalem, of which Jesus said there had been nothing, and would be nothing, like it in the history of the world.

Herod was on the throne—crafty, cruel, sensual, imperious, and magnificent. The gorgeous temple which bore his name was the scene of priestly service and sacramental rites. The great national feasts of the Passover, of Tabernacles, and Pentecost, were celebrated with solemn pomp, and attracted vast crowds from all the world. In every part of the land synagogues were maintained with punctilious care, and crowds of scribes were perpetually engaged in a microscopic study of the law, and in the instruction of the people. In revenue, and popular attention, and apparent devoutness, that period had not been excelled in the most palmy days of Solomon or Hezekiah. But

beneath this decorous surface the rankest, foulest, most desperate corruption throve.

To the aged couple in the hill-country of Judæa, as to Mary and Joseph at Nazareth, must have come tidings of the murder of Aristobulus, of the cruel death of Mariamne and her sons, and of the aged Hyrcanus. They must have groaned beneath the grinding oppression by which Herod extorted from the poorer classes the immense revenues which he squandered on his palaces and fortresses and the creation of new cities. That he was introducing everywhere Gentile customs and games; that he had dared to place the Roman eagle on the main entrance of the temple; that he had pillaged David's tomb; that he had set aside the great council of their nation, and blinded the saintly Jochanan; that the religious leaders, men like Caiaphas and Annas, were quite willing to wink at the crimes of the secular power, so long as their prestige and emoluments were secured; that the national independence for which Judas and his brothers had striven, during the Maccabean wars, was fast being laid at the feet of Rome, who was only too willing to take advantage of the chaos which followed immediately upon Herod's hideous death—such tidings must have come, in successive shocks of anguish, to those true hearts who were waiting for the redemption of Israel, with all the more eagerness as it seemed so long delayed, so urgently needed. Still, they made their yearly journeys to Jerusalem, and participated in the great convocations,

which in outward splendour, eclipsed memories of the past; but they realized that the glory had departed, and that the mere husk of externalism could not long resist the incoming tides of militarism, of the love of display, and the corrupting taint of the worst aspects of Roman civilization. When the feasts were over, these pious hearts turned back to their homes among the hills, tearing themselves from the last glimpse of the beautiful city, with the cry, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem!"

The darkest hour precedes the dawn, and it was just at this point that Old Testament predictions must have been so eagerly scanned by those that watched and waited. That the Messiah was nigh, they could not doubt. The term of years foretold by Daniel had nearly expired. The sceptre had departed from Judah, and the Lawgiver from between his feet. Even the Gentile world was penetrated with the expectation of a King. Sybils in their ancient writings, hermits in their secret cells, Magi studying the dazzling glories of the eastern heavens, had come to the conclusion that He was at hand who would bring again the Golden Age.

And so those loyal and loving souls that often spake together, whilst the Lord hearkened and heard, must have felt that as the advent of the Lord whom they sought was nigh, that of his messenger must be nearer still. They started at every footfall. They listened for every voice. They scanned the expression of every face. "Behold, He shall come," rang in their hearts like a peal of silver bells. At any moment might a

voice be heard crying, "Cast up, cast up the highway; gather out the stones; lift up an ensign for the peoples. Say ye to the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy salvation cometh." Those anticipations were realized in the birth of John the Baptist.

II

The House of Zacharias.

(Luke i.)

"There are in this world's stunning tide,
Of human care and pain, with whom the memories abide,
Of the everlasting chime."—Keble.

TO the evangelist Luke we are indebted for details of those antecedent circumstances that ushered John the Baptist into the world. He tells us that he had "traced the course of all things accurately from the first." And in those final words, "from the first," he suggests that he had deliberately sought to examine into those striking events from which, as from a wide-spreading root, the great growth of Christianity had originated. Who of us has not sometimes followed the roots of some newly-discovered plant deep into the black mould, intent on pursuing them to their furthest extremity, and extricating them from the clinging earth without injuring one delicate radicle? So this good physician, accustomed by his training to accurate research and experiment, went back to scenes and events anterior to any which his brother evangelists recorded. He compensated for the authority of

an eye-witness by the thoroughness and care of his investigation.

What were the sources from which the third Evangelist drew his information? We cannot be sure, but may hazard a suggestion, which is supported by the archaic simplicity, the indescribable grace, the almost idyllic beauty of his two opening chapters. Critics have repeatedly drawn attention to their unique character, and insisted that they are due to some other hand than that which has given us the rest of the story of "the Son of Man." And why should we not attribute them to "the Mother" herself? It has been truly said that mothers are the natural historians of their children's early days—never tired of observing them, they never tire of recounting their prodigies; and, in an especial manner, Mary had kept all things, pondering in her heart those wonderful circumstances which had left so indelible an impression on her life. She who, in her over-welling joy, uttered "the Magnificat," was surely capable, even judging from a literary and human standpoint, of the language in which the story is told; and the facts themselves would only stand out the clearer in her closing years, as many another memory faded from her mind. The granite remains when the floods have swept away the light soil that filled the interstices of the rocks.

It were a theme worthy of a great artist to depict. Mary's face, furrowed by deep lines of anguish, yet glowing with sacred fire and holy memory. Luke, sit-

ting at his manuscript, now letting her tell her story without interruption, and again interpolating an inquiry, the words growing on the page; whilst, nearer than each to either, making no tremor in the hot summer air as He comes, casting no shadow in the brilliant eastern light—He of whom they speak and write steals in to stand beside them, bringing all things to their remembrance by the Holy Spirit's agency, even as He had told them.

The story of John the Baptist was so clearly part of that of Jesus, that Mary could hardly recall the one without the other. And, besides, Elisabeth, as the angel said, was her kinswoman, perhaps her cousin, to whom she naturally turned in the hour of her maidenly astonishment and rapture. Though much younger, Mary was united to her relative by a close and tender tie, and it was only natural that what had happened to her should have impressed her almost as deeply as her own memorable experiences. So it is probable that from the lips of the mother of our Lord we obtain these details of the House of Zacharias.

I. The Quiet in the Land.—God has always had his hidden ones; and, whilst the world has been rent by faction and war, ravaged by fire and sword, and drenched with the blood of her sons, these have heard his call to enter into the doors, and shut themselves in until the storm had spent its fury. It was so during the days of Ahab, when the eye of omniscience beheld

at least seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal. It was so in the awful days of the Civil War, when Puritan and Royalist faced each other at Naseby and Marston Moor, and the land seemed swept in a blinding storm. Groups of ardent souls gathered to spend their time in worship and acts of mercy—like those at Little Gidding, in Huntingdonshire, under the direction of Mr. Nicholas Ferrar. It was so when the thirty years' war desolated Germany, and "the quiet in the land" withdrew themselves from the agitated scene of human affairs to wait on God, embalming their hearts in hymns and poems which exhale a perfume as from crushed flowers.

It was eminently so in the days of which we write. Darkness covered the earth, and gross darkness the people. Herod's infamous cruelties, craft, and bloodshed were at their height. The country questioned with fear what new direction his crimes might take. The priesthood was obsequious to his whim; the bonds of society seemed dissolved. Theudas and Judas of Galilee, mentioned by Gamaliel, were but specimens of the bandit leaders who broke into revolt and harried the country districts for the maintenance of their followers. Greed, peculation, and lawless violence, had ample and undisputed opportunity to despoil the national glory and corrupt the heart of the national life.

Is it to be wondered that the Godly remnant would meet in little groups and secluded hiding-places to comfort themselves in God? We are told, for instance,

that Anna spake of the Babe, whom she had probably embraced in her aged trembling arms, "to all them that were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke ii. 38, R. V.). What would we not give to know something more of the members of this sacred society, which preserved the loftiest traditions, and embodied in their lives some of the finest traits of the religion of their forefathers? The gloom of their times only led them more eagerly to con the predictions of their Hebrew prophets, and desire their accomplishment. Full often they would climb the heights and look out over the desert wastes to descry the advent of the Mighty One, coming from Edom, with his garments stained with the blood of Israel's foes. When they met, the burden of conversation, which flowed under vine or fig-tree, by the wayside or in humble homes, would be of their cherished hope. And as they beheld the hapless condition of their fatherland, the land of Abraham, the city of David, the cry must often have been extorted: "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will it be ere He shall come whose right it is, who shall sit on the throne of his father David, and of whose kingdom there shall be no end? Come forth out of thy royal chambers, O Prince of all the kings of the earth! Put on the visible robes of thy imperial majesty; take up that unlimited sceptre which thy Almighty Father hath bequeathed Thee; for now the voice of thy bride calls Thee, and all creatures sigh to be renewed." So our great Milton prayed in more recent days.

We are not drawing on our imagination in describing these true-hearted watchers for the rising of the Day-star. They are fully indicated in the Gospel story. There was Simeon, righteous and devout, unto whom it had been revealed by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ; and Anna, the prophetess, who departed not from the temple, worshipping with fastings and supplications night and day; and the guileless Nathanael, an Israelite indeed, who had perhaps already commenced to sit at the foot of the ladder which bound his fig-tree to the highest heaven; and the peasant maiden Mary, the descendant of a noble house, though with fallen fortunes, who, like some vestal virgin, clad in snowy white, watched through the dark hours beside the flickering flame; and last, but not least, Zacharias and his wife Elisabeth, "who were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless."

For us, too, the times are dark. It is as though the shadows were being thrown far across the fields, and the light were becoming dim. Let the children of God draw together, to encourage each other in their holy faith, and to speak of their great hopes; for He who appeared once to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself shall appear a second time without sin unto salvation. We are, as the French version puts it, *burgesses of the skies,* "whence we wait for a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall fashion anew the body of our

humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, according to the working whereby He is able even to subject all things unto Himself."

But this attitude of spirit, which dwells in the unseen and eternal, which counts on the indwelling of the Son of God by faith, and which ponders deeply over the sins and sorrows of the world around, is the temper of mind out of which the greatest deeds are wrought for the cause of God on the earth. The Marys who sit at Christ's feet arise to anoint Him for his burying. Take, for instance, the Moravian Church, born and cradled amid the pietism of which Spener of Berlin and Franke of Halle were the acknowledged leaders; and it has given to the world a far larger number of missionaries in proportion to its membership than any church of the age. Or take the followers of George Fox, who have maintained through unparalleled suffering their testimony for spirituality of worship; and it is undeniable that some of the greatest reforms which have characterised the receding century have found their foremost advocates and apologists from their somewhat meagre ranks. Those who wait on God renew their strength. The world ignores them, scorning to reckon their tears and toils amid its renovating energies; but they refuse to abate their endeavours and sacrifices on its behalf. They repay its neglect by more assiduous exertions, its ingratitude by more exhausting sacrifices; content if, from out their ranks, there presently steps one who, like John the Bap-

tist, opens a new chapter in the history of the race, and accelerates the advent of the Christ.

II. The Parentage of the Forerunner.—As the traveller emerges from the dreary wilderness that lies between Sinai and the southern frontier of Palestine—a scorching desert, in which Elijah was glad to find shelter from the sword-like rays in the shade of the retem shrub—he sees before him a long line of hills, which is the beginning "of the hill country of Judæa" (Luke i. 39). In contrast with the sand wastes which he has traversed, the valleys seem to laugh and sing. Greener and yet greener grow the pasture lands, till he can understand how Nabal and other sheep-masters were able to find maintenance for vast flocks of sheep. Here and there are the crumbled ruins which mark the site of ancient towns and villages tenanted now by the jackal or the wandering Arab. Amongst these, a modern traveller has identified the site of Juttah, the village home of the priest Zacharias and his wife Elisabeth.

To judge by their names, we may infer that their parents years before had been godly people. *Zacharias* meant *God's remembrance;* as though he were to be a perpetual reminder to his fellows of what God had promised, and to God of what they were expecting from his hand. *Elisabeth* meant *God's oath;* as though her people were perpetually appealing to those covenant promises in which, since He could swear by no greater, God had sworn by Himself that He would

never leave nor forsake, and that when the Sceptre departed from Judah and the Law-giver from between his feet, Shiloh should come.

Zacharias was a priest, "of the course of Abijah," and twice a year he journeyed to Jerusalem to fulfil his office, for a week of six days and two Sabbaths. There were, Josephus tells us, somewhat more than 20,000 priests settled in Judæa at this time; and very many of them were like those whom Malachi denounced as degrading and depreciating the Temple services. The general character of the priesthood was deeply tainted by the corruption of the times, and as a class they were blind leaders of the blind. Not a few, however, were evidently deeply religious men, for we find that "a great number of the priests," after the crucifixion, believed on Christ and joined his followers. In this class we must therefore place Zacharias, who, with his wife, herself of the daughters of Aaron, is described as being "righteous before God."

The phrases are evidently selected with care. Many are righteous *before men;* but they were righteous *before God.* Their daily life and walk were regulated by a careful observance of the ordinances of the ceremonial and the commandments of the moral law. It is evident, from the apt and plentiful quotations from Scripture with which the song of Zacharias is replete, that the Scriptures were deeply pondered and reverenced in that highland home; and we have the angel's testimony to the prayers that ascended day and night.

In all these things they were blameless—not faultless, as judged by God's infinite standard of rectitude, but blameless—because they lived up to the fullest limit of their knowledge of the will of God. They were blameless and harmless, the children of God, without blemish, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom they were seen as lights in the world, holding forth amid neighbours and friends the Word of Truth.

But they lived under the shadow of a great sorrow. "They had no child, because Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years." When the good priest put off his official dress of white linen, and returned to his mountain home, there was no childish voice to welcome him. It seemed almost certain that their family would soon die out and be forgotten; that no child would close their eyes in death; and that by no link whatsoever could they be connected with the Messiah, to be the progenitor of whom was the cherished longing of each Hebrew parent.

"They had no child!" They would, therefore, count themselves under the frown of God; and the mother especially felt that a reproach lay on her. What a clue to the anguish of the soul is furnished by her own reflection, when she recognised the glad divine interposition on her behalf, and cried, "Thus hath the Lord done unto me in the days wherein He looked upon me, to take away *my reproach among men*" (Luke i. 25).

But had it not been for this sorrow they might never have been qualified to receive the first tidings of the near approach of the Messiah. *Sorrow* opens our eyes, and bids us see visions within the vail, which cannot be described by those who have not wept. *Sorrow* leads us up the steep mountain of vision, and opens the panorama which lies beyond the view of those who dare not attempt the craggy steep. *Sorrow* prepares us to see angels standing beside the altar of incense at the hour of prayer, and to hear words that mortal lips may not utter until they are fulfilled. *Sorrow* leads us to open our house to those who carry a great anguish in their hearts, who come to us needing shelter and comfort; to discover finally that we have entertained an angel unawares, and that in some trembling maiden, threatened by divorce from her espoused, we have welcomed the mother of the Lord (ver. 43). Shrink not from sorrow. It endures but for the brief eastern night; joy cometh in the morning, to remain. It may be caused by long waiting and apparently fruitless prayer. Beneath its pressure heart and flesh may faint. All natural hope may have become dead, and the soul be plunged in hopeless despair. "Yet the Lord will command his loving-kindness in the morning;" and it will be seen that the dull autumn sowings of tears and loneliness and pain were the necessary preliminary for that heavenly messenger who, standing "on the right side of the altar of incense," shall assure us that our prayer is heard.

III. The Angel's Announcement.—One memorable autumn, when the land was full of the grape-harvest, Zacharias left his home, in the cradle of the hills, some three thousand feet above the Mediterranean, for his priestly service. Reaching the temple he would lodge in the cloisters, and spend his days in the innermost court, which none might enter, save priests in their sacred garments. Among the various priestly duties, none was held in such high esteem as the offering of incense, which was presented morning and evening, on a special golden altar, in the Holy Place at the time of prayer. "The whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense." So honourable was this office that it was fixed by lot, and none was allowed to perform it twice. Only once in a priest's life was he permitted to sprinkle the incense on the burning coals, which an assistant had already brought from the altar of burnt-sacrifice, and spread on the altar of incense before the vail.

The silver trumpets had sounded. The smoke of the evening sacrifice was ascending. The worshippers that thronged the different courts, rising tier on tier, were engaged in silent prayer. The assistant priest had retired; and Zacharias, for the first and only time in his life, stood alone in the holy shrine, whilst the incense which he had strewn on the glowing embers arose in fragrant clouds, enveloping and veiling the objects around, whilst it symbolized the ascent of prayers and intercessions not only from his own heart, but from the

hearts of his people, into the presence of God. "And their prayer came up to his holy habitation, even unto heaven."

What a litany of prayer poured from his heart! For Israel, that the chosen people should be delivered from their low estate; for the cause of religion, that it might be revived; for the crowds without, that God would hear the prayers they were offering towards his holy sanctuary; and, perhaps, for Elisabeth and himself, that, if possible, God would hear their prayer, and, if not that He would grant them to bear patiently their heavy sorrow.

"And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense." Mark how circumstantial the narrative is. There could be no mistake. He stood—and he stood on the right side. It was Gabriel who stands in the presence of God who had been sent to speak to him, and declare the good tidings that his prayer was heard; that his wife should bear a son, who should be called John; that the child should be welcomed with joy, should be a Nazarite from his birth, should be filled with the Holy Spirit from his birth, should inherit the spirit and power of Elias, and should go before the face of Christ to prepare his way by turning the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to walk in the wisdom of the just.

He tarried long in the temple, and what wonder! The people would have ceased to marvel at the long

suspense, could they have known the cause of the delay. Presently he came out; but when he essayed to pronounce the customary blessing his lips were dumb. He made signs as he reached forth his hands in the attitude of benediction; but that day no blessing fell on their upturned faces. He continued making signs unto them and remained dumb. Dumb, because he questioned the likelihood of so good and gracious an answer. Dumb, because he believed not the archangel's words. Dumb, that he might learn in silence and solitude the full purposes of God to set them presently to song. Dumb, that the tidings might not spread as yet. Dumb, as the representative of that wonderful system, which for so long had spoken to mankind with comparatively little result, but was now to be superseded by the Word of God.

With the light of that glory on his face, and those sweet notes of "Fear not" ringing in his heart, Zacharias continued to fulfil the duties of his ministration, and, when his work was fulfilled, departed unto his house. But that day was long remembered by the people, prelude as it was to the time when their blessings would no longer come from Ebal or Gerizim, but from Calvary; and when the great High Priest would utter from heaven the ancient words:

The Lord bless thee and keep thee.
The Lord cause his face to shine upon thee and be gracious to thee.
The Lord lift upon thee the light of his countenance and give thee peace.

III

His Schools and Schoolmasters.

(Luke i.)

"Oh to have watched thee through the vineyards wander,
Pluck the ripe ears, and into evening roam!—
Followed, and known that in the twilight yonder
Legions of angels shone about thy home!"

F. W. H. Myers.

ZACHARIAS and Elisabeth had probably almost ceased to pray for a child, or to urge the matter. It seemed useless to pray further. There had been no heaven-sent sign to assure them that there was any likelihood of their prayer being answered, and nature seemed to utter a final No; when suddenly the angel of God broke into the commonplace of their life, like a meteorite into the unrippled water of a mountain-sheltered lake, bringing the assurance that there was no need for fear, and the announcement that their prayer was heard. It must have been like hearing news that a ship, long overdue and almost despaired of, has suddenly made harbour.

It is not impossible that prayers that we have ceased to pray, and are in despair about, will yet return to us

with the words, *Thy supplication is heard,* endorsed on them in our Father's handwriting. Not unfrequently dividends are paid on investments which we have given up as valueless. Fruit that mellows longest in the sun is ripest. Such things may transcend altogether our philosophy of prayer; but we are prepared for this, since God is accustomed to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.

On his arrival in his home, the aged priest, by means of the writing-table referred to afterwards, informed his wife, who apparently had not accompanied him, of all that had happened, even to the name which the child was to bear. She, at least, seems to have found no difficulty in accepting the divine assurance, and during her five months of seclusion she nursed great and mighty thoughts in her heart, in the belief and prayer that her child would become all that his name is supposed to signify, *the gift of Jehovah.* It was Elisabeth also who recognised in Mary the mother of her Lord, greeted her as blessed among women, and assured her that there would be for her a fulfilment of the things which had been promised her.

Month succeeded month; but Zacharias neither heard nor spoke. His friends had to make signs to him, for unbelief has the effect of shutting man out of the enjoyment of life, and hindering his usefulness. How different this time of waiting from the blessedness it brought to his wife's young relative, who believed the heavenly messenger. He was evidently a good man,

and well versed in the history of his people. His soul, as we learn from his song, was full of noble pride in the great and glorious past. He could believe that when Abraham and Sarah were past age, a child was born to *them,* who filled their tent with his merry prattle and laughter; but he could not believe that such a blessing could fall to his lot. And is not that the point where our faith staggers still? We can believe in the wonder-working power of God on the distant horizon of the past, or on the equally distant horizon of the future; but that He should have a definite and particular care for *our* life, that *our* prayers should touch Him, that He should give *us* the desire of our heart—this staggers us, and we feel it is too good to be true.

During the whole period that the stricken but expectant priest spent in his living tomb, shut off from communication with the outer world, his spirit was becoming charged with holy emotion, that waited for the first opportunity of expression. Such an opportunity came at length. His lowly dwelling was one day crowded with an eager and enthusiastic throng of relatives and friends. They had gathered to congratulate the aged pair, to perform the initial rite of Judaism, and to name the infant boy that lay in his mother's arms. Ah, what joy was hers when they came to "magnify the Lord's mercy towards her, and to rejoice with her"! As the people passed in and out, there

was a new glow in the brilliant eastern sunlight, a new glory on the familiar hills.

In their perplexity at the mother's insistence that the babe's name should be John—none of his kindred being known by that name—they appealed to his father, who with trembling hand inscribed on the wax of the writing tablet the verdict, "His name is John." So soon as he had broken the iron fetter of unbelief in thus acknowledging the fulfilment of the angel's words, "his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, blessing God. And fear came on all that dwelt round about them." And these sayings quickly became the staple theme of conversation throughout all the hill-country of Judæa; and wherever they came, they excited the profoundest expectation. People laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What, then, shall this child be?"

"And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit." "And the hand of the Lord was with him."

There were several remarkable formative influences operating on this young life.

I. The School of Home.—*His father was a priest.* John's earliest memories would register the frequent absence of his father in the fulfilment of his course; and, on his return, with what eagerness would the boy drink in a recital of all that had transpired in the Holy City! We can imagine how the three would sit to-

gether beneath their trellised vine, in the soft light of the fading sunset, and talk of Zion, their chief joy. No wonder that in after days, as he looked on Jesus as He walked, he pointed to Him and said, "Behold the Lamb of God"; for, from the earliest, his young mind had been saturated with thoughts of sacrifice.

When old enough his parents would take him with them to one of the great festivals, where, amid the thronging crowds, his boyish eyes opened for the first time upon the stately temple, the order and vestments of the priests, the solemn pomp of the Levitical ceremonial. The young heart dilated and expanded with wonder and pride; but how little he realized that his ministry would be the first step to its entire subversal.

He would be also taught carefully in the *Holy Scriptures*. Like young Timothy, he would know them from early childhood. The song of Zacharias reveals a vivid and realistic familiarity with the prophecies and phraseology of the Scriptures; and as the happy parents recited them to his infant mind, they would stay to emphasize them with impressive personal references. What would we not have given to hear Zacharias quote Isaiah xl. or Malachi iii., and turn to the lad at his knee, saying—These words refer to thee:—

"Yea, and thou, child, shalt be called the Prophet of the Most High; for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways."

Would not the aged priest speak to his son in thoughts and words like those with which his song is

so replete? Might he not speak to him in some such way as this: "My boy, God has fulfilled his holy covenant, the oath which He sware unto Abraham, our father. Because of the tender mercy of our God, the Dayspring from on high has visited us, to shine upon them that sit in darkness, and to guide our feet into the way of peace." Then he would proceed to tell him the marvellous story of his kinsman's birth in Bethlehem, and of his growing grace in Nazareth. "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel," the old man said; "for He hath visited and redeemed his people, and hath raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as He spake by the mouth of the holy prophets, which have been since the world began." Next the father would tell as much of the story of Herod's crimes, and of his oppressive rule, as the lad could understand, and explain how there would soon be "salvation from their enemies, and from the hand of all that hated them." And his young soul would be thrilled by the hopes which were bursting in the bud, and so near breaking into flower.

Sometimes when they were abroad together in the early dawn, and saw the first peep of day, the father would say: "John, do you see that light breaking over the hills? What that day-spring is to the world, Jesus, thy cousin at Nazareth, will be to the darkness of sin." Then, turning to the morning star, shining in the path of the dawn, and paling as they gazed, he would say: "See thy destiny, my son: I am an old

man, and shall not live to see thee in thy meridian strength; but thou shalt shine for only a brief space, and then decrease, whilst He shall increase from the faint flush of day-spring to the perfect day." And might not the child reply, with a flash of intelligent appreciation?—"Yes, father, I understand; but I shall be satisfied if only I have prepared the way of the Lord."

There were also the associations of the surrounding country. The story of Abraham would often be recited in the proximity of Machpelah's sacred cave. The career of David could not be unfamiliar to a youth who was within easy reach of the haunts of the shepherd-psalmist. And the exploits of the Maccabees would stir his soul, as his parents recounted the deeds of Judas and his brethren, in which the ancient Hebrew faith and prowess had revived in one last glorious outburst.

How ineffaceable are the impressions of the Home! What the father is when he comes back at night from his toils, and what the mother is all day; what may be the staple of conversation in the home: whether the father is willing to be the companion of his child, answering his questions, and superintending the gradual unfolding of his mind; how often the Bible is opened and explained; how the weekly rest-day is spent; the attitude of the home towards strong drink in every shape and form, and all else that might injure the young life, as gas does plants—all these are vital to the right nurture and direction of boys and girls who can

only wax strong in spirit when all early influences combine in the same direction.

II. THERE WAS THE SCHOOL OF HIS NAZARITE-VOW. —The angel, who announced his birth, foretold that he should drink neither wine nor strong drink from his birth, but that he should be filled with the Holy Spirit. "John," said our Lord, "came neither eating nor drinking." This abstinence from all stimulants was a distinct sign of the Nazarite, together with the unshorn locks, and the care with which he abstained from contact with death. In some cases, the vow of the Nazarite might be taken for a time, or, as in the case of Samson, Samuel, and John, it might be for life. But, whether for shorter or longer the Nazarite held himself as peculiarly given up to the service of God, pliant to the least indication of his will, quick to catch the smallest whisper of his voice, and mighty in his strength.

"Mother, why do I wear my hair so long? You never cut it, as the mothers of other boys do."

"No, my son," was the proud and glad reply; "you must never cut it as long as you live: *you are a Nazarite.*"

"Mother, why may I not taste the grapes? The boys say they are so nice and sweet. May I not, next vintage?"

"No, never," his mother would reply; "you must never touch the fruit of the vine: *you are a Nazarite.*"

If, as they walked along the public way, they saw a bone left by some hungry dog, or a little bird fallen to the earth to die, and the boy would approach to touch either, the mother would call him back to her side, saying, "Thou must never touch a dead thing. If thy father were to die, or I, beside thee, thou must not move us from the spot, but call for help. Remember always that thou art separated unto God; his vows are upon thee, and thou must let nothing, either in symbol or reality, steal away his power from thy young heart and life."

The effect of this would be excellent. It would give a direction and purpose to the lad's thoughts and anticipations. He realized that he was set apart for a great mission in life. The brook heard the call of the sea. Besides which, he would acquire self-restraint, self-mastery.

What is it to be "strong in spirit"? The man who carries everything before him with the impetuous rush of his nature, before whose outbursts men tremble, and who insists in all things on asserting his wild, masterful will—is he the strong man? Nay! most evidently he must be classed among the weaklings. The strength of a man is in proportion to the feelings which he curbs and subdues, and not which subdue him. The man who receives a flagrant insult, and answers quietly; the man who bears a hopeless daily trial, and remains silent; the man who with strong passions remains chaste, or with a quick sense of injustice can refrain himself

and remain calm—these are strong men; and John waxed strong, because, from the earliest dawn of thought, he was taught the necessity of refusing things which in themselves might have been permissible, but for him were impossible.

On each of us rests the vow of separation by right of our union with the Son of God, who was holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners. Remember how He went without the camp, bearing our reproach; how they cast Him forth to the death of the Cross; and how He awaits us on the Easter side of death—and surely we can find no pleasure in the world where He found no place. His death has made a lasting break between his followers and the rest of men. They are crucified to the world, and the world to them. Let us not taste of the intoxicating joys in which the children of the present age indulge; let us allow no Delilah passion to pass her scissors over our locks; and let us be very careful not to receive contamination; to have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but to come out and be separate, not touching the unclean thing.

But whilst we put away all that injures our own life or the lives of others, let us be very careful to discriminate, to draw the line where God would have it drawn, exaggerating and extenuating nothing. It is important to remember that while the motto of the old covenant was Exclusion, even of innocent and natural things, that of the new is Inclusion. Moses for-

bade the Jews having horses; but Zechariah said that in the new they might own horses, only "Holiness to the Lord" must be engraven on the bells of their harness. Christ has come to sanctify all life. Whether we eat, or drink, or whatever we do, we are to do all to his glory. Disciples are not to be taken out of the world, but kept from its evil. "Every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the Word of God, and prayer." Natural instincts are not to be crushed, but transfigured.

This is the great contrast between the Baptist and the Son of Man. The Nazarite would have felt it a sin against the law of his vocation and office to touch anything pertaining to the vine. Christ performed his first miracle by providing wine in abundance, though of an innocuous kind, for the peasants' wedding at Cana. John would have lost all sanctity had he touched the bodies of the dead, or the flesh of a leper. Christ would touch a bier, pass his hands over the seared flesh of the leper, and stand sympathetically beside the grave of his friend. Thus we catch a glimpse of our Lord's meaning when He affirms that, though John was the greatest of women born, yet the least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

III. There was the School of the Desert.—"The child was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel." Probably Zacharias died when John was quite young, and Elisabeth also. But the boy

had grown into adolescence, was able to care for himself, and " the hand of the Lord was with him."

Beneath the guidance and impulse of that hand he tore himself from the little home where he had first seen the tender light of day, and spent happy years, to go forth from the ordinary haunts of men, perhaps hardly knowing whither. There was a wild restlessness in his soul. A young man, pleading the other day with his father to be allowed to emigrate to the West, urged that whereas there are *inches* here there are *acres* there; and something of this kind may have been in the heart of John. He desired to free himself from the conventionalities and restraints of the society amid which he had been brought up, that he might develop after his own fashion, with no laws but those he received from heaven.

Fatherless, motherless, brotherless, sisterless—a lone man, he passed forth into the great and terrible wilderness of Judæa, which is so desolate that the Jews called it the abomination of desolation. Travellers who have passed over and through it tell us that it is destitute of all animal life, save a chance vulture or fox. For the most part, it is a waste of sand, swept by wild winds. When Jesus was there some two or three years after, He found nothing to eat; the stones around mocked his hunger; and there was no company save that of the wild beasts.

In this great and terrible wilderness, John supported himself by eating locusts—the literal insect, which is

still greatly esteemed by the natives—and wild honey, which abounded in the crevices of the rocks; whilst for clothing he was content with a coat of coarse camel's hair, such as the Arab women make still; and a girdle of skin about his loins. A cave, like that in which David and his men often found refuge, sufficed him for a home, and the water of the streams that hurried to the Dead Sea, his beverage.

Can we wonder that under such a regimen he grew strong? We become weak by continual contact with our fellows. We sink to their level; we accommodate ourselves to their fashions and whims; we limit the natural development of character on God's plan; we take on the colour of the bottom on which we lie. But in loneliness and solitude, wherein we meet God, we become strong. God's strong men are rarely clothed in soft raiment, or found in kings' courts. Obadiah, who stood in awe of Ahab, was a very different man from Elijah, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead, and stood before the Lord.

Yes, and there is a source of strength beside. He who is filled and taught, as John was, by the Spirit, is strengthened by might in the inner man. All things are possible to him that believes. Simon Bar Jona becomes Peter when he touches the Christ. The youths faint and are weary, and the young men utterly fall; but they that wait on the Lord renew their strength: they who know God are strong and do exploits.

IV.

The Prophet of the Highest.

(Luke i.)

"Ye hermits blest, ye holy maids,
The nearest heaven on earth,
Who talk with God in shadowy glades,
Free from rude care and mirth;
To whom some viewless Teacher brings
The secret love of rural things,
The moral of each fleeting cloud and gale,
The whispers from above, that haunt the twilight vale."

Keble.

"THOU, child, shalt be called the Prophet of the Most High"—thus Zacharias addressed his infant son, as he lay in the midst of that group of wondering neighbours and friends. What a thrill of ecstasy quivered in the words! A long period, computed at four hundred years, had passed since the last great Hebrew prophet had uttered the words of the Highest. Reaching back from him to the days of Moses had been a long line of prophets, who had passed down the lighted torch from hand to hand. And the fourteen generations, during which the prophetic office had been discontinued, had gone wearily. But now hope revived, as the angel-voice proclaimed the

advent of a prophet. Our Lord corroborated his words when, in after days, He said that John had been a prophet, and something more. "But what went ye out to see?" he asked. "A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet."

The Hebrew word that stands for *prophet* is said to be derived from a root signifying "to boil or bubble over," and suggests a fountain bursting from the heart of the man into which God had poured it. It is a mistake to confine the word to the prediction of coming events; for so employed it would hardly be applicable to men like Moses, Samuel, and Elijah, in the Old Testament, or John the Baptist and the apostle Paul, in the New, who were certainly prophets in the deepest significance of that term. Prophecy means the forth-telling of the Divine message. The prophet is borne along by the stream of Divine indwelling and inflowing, whether he utters the truth for the moment or anticipates the future. "God spake *in* the prophets" (Hebrews i. 1, R. V.). And when they were conscious of his mighty moving and stirring within, woe to them if they did not utter it in burning words, fresh minted from the heart.

With Malachi, the succession that had continued unbroken from the very foundations of the Jewish commonwealth had terminated. Pious Israelites might have found befitting expression for that lament in the words, "We see not our signs: there is no more any prophet" (Psa. lxxiv. 9).

But as the voice of Old Testament prophecy ceased, with its last breath it foretold that it would be followed, in the after time, by a new and glorious revival of the noblest traditions of the prophetic office. "Behold," so God spake by Malachi, "I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord come. And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers; lest I come and smite the earth with a curse" (Mal. iv. 5, 6).

I. The Formative Influences by which the Baptist's Prophetic Nature was Moulded.—Amongst these we must place in the foremost place *the Prophecies*, which had given a forecast of his career. From his childhood and upwards they had been reiterated in his ear by his parents, who would never weary of reciting them.

How often he would ponder the reference to himself in the great Messianic prediction—"Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God. . . . The voice of one that crieth, Prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. . . ." There was no doubt as to the relevance of those words to himself (Luke i. 76; Matt. iii. 3). And it must have unconsciously wrought mightily in the influence it wielded over his character and ministry.

There was, also, that striking anticipation by Malachi which we have already quoted, and which directly sug-

gested Elijah as his model. Had not Gabriel himself alluded to it, when he foretold that the predicted child would go before the Messiah, in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke i. 17)? And again his statement was confirmed by our Lord in after days (Matt. xi. 14).

Thus the great figure of Elijah was ever before the mind of the growing youth, as his model and inspiration. He found himself perpetually asking, How did Elijah act, and what would he do here and now? And there is little doubt that his choice of the lonely wilderness, of the mantle of rough camel's hair, of the abrupt and arousing form of address, was suggested by that village of Thisbe in the land of Gilead, and those personal characteristics which were so familiar in the Prophet of Fire.

But the mind of the Forerunner must also have been greatly exercised by *the lawlessness and crime* which involved all classes of his countrymen in a common condemnation. The death of Herod, occurring when John was yet a child, dependent on the care of the good Elisabeth, had led to disturbances which afforded an excuse for the Roman occupation of Jerusalem. The Sceptre had departed from Judah, and the lawgiver from between his feet. The High Priesthood was a mere forfeit in the deals of Idumæan tetrarchs and Roman governors. The publicans were notorious for their exactions, their covetousness, their cheating and oppression of the people. Soldiers filled the country with violence, extortion, and discontent. The priests

were hirelings; the Pharisees were hypocrites; the ruling classes had set aside their primitive simplicity and purity, and were given up to the voluptuousness and licence of the Empire. "Brood of vipers" was apparently not too strong a phrase to use of the foremost religious leaders of the day—at least when used, its relevance passed without challenge.

Tidings of the evil that was overflowing the land like a deluge of ink were constantly coming to the ears of his eager soul, filling it with horror and dismay; and to this must be traced much of the austerity which arrested the attention of his contemporaries. The idea which lies beneath the fasting and privation of so many of God's servants, has been that of an overwhelming sorrow, which has taken away all taste for the pleasures and comforts of life. And this was the thought by which John was penetrated. On the one hand, there was his deep and agonizing conviction of the sin of Israel; and on the other, the belief that the Messiah must be nigh, even at the doors. Thus the pressure of the burden increased on him till he was forced to give utterance to the cry it extorted from his soul: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

But in addition to these we must add *the vision of God,* which must have been specially vouchsafed to him whilst he sojourned in those lonely wilds. He spoke once of Him "who sent him to baptize." Evidently he had become accustomed to detect his presence and hear his voice. Those still small accents which had

fallen on the ear of his great prototype had thrilled his soul. He, too, had seen the Lord high and lifted up, had heard the chant of the seraphim, and had felt the live coal touch his lips, as it had been caught from the altar by the seraph's tongs.

This has ever been characteristic of the true prophet. He has been a seer. He has spoken, because he has beheld with his eyes, looked upon, and handled the very Word of God. The Divine Prophet, speaking for all that had preceded Him, said: "We speak that which we know, and testify that we have seen."

In this we may have some share. It is permitted to us also to see; to climb the Mount of Vision, and look on the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ; to have revealed to us things that eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived. Let us remember that we are to be God's *witnesses* in the Jerusalem of the home, the Judæa of our immediate neighbours, and to the uttermost parts of the earth of our profession or daily calling. God demands not advocates, but witnesses; and we must see for ourselves, before we can bear witness to others, the glory of that light still flushing our faces, and the accent of conviction minted in our speech.

These are the three signs of a prophet; vision, a deep conviction of sin and impending judgment, and the gushing forth of moving and eloquent speech; and each of these was apparent, in an exalted and extreme degree, in John the son of Zacharias.

II. An Illustrative and Remarkable Parallel. —As John came in the spirit and power of Elijah, so, four hundred years ago, in the lovely city of Florence, a man was sent from God to testify against the sins of his age, who in many particulars so exactly corresponds with our Lord's forerunner that the one strongly recalls the other; and it may help us to bring the circumstances of the Baptist's ministry within a measurable distance of ourselves if we briefly compare them with the career of Girolamo Savonarola. It must, of course, be always borne in mind that the great Florentine could lay no claim to the peculiar and unique position and power of the Baptist. But, in many respects, there is a remarkable parallel and similarity between them, which will help us to translate the old Hebrew conceptions into our modern life.

The physician's household at Ferrara, into which Savonarola was born on September 21, 1452, was probably no more distinguished amid other families of the town than that of Zacharias and Elisabeth in the hill country of Judæa.

And as we read of the invincible love of truth which characterised the keen and intelligent lad, we are forcibly reminded of the Baptist, whose whole life was an eloquent protest on behalf of reality. In one of his greatest sermons Savonarola declared that he had always striven after truth with all his might, and maintained a constant war against falsehood. "The more trouble"—they are his own words—"I bestowed upon

my quest, the greater became my longing, so that for it I was prepared to abandon life itself. When I was but a boy, I had such thoughts; and from that time, the desire and longing after this good has gone on increasing to the present day."

We cannot read of Savonarola's saintly life, over which even the breath of calumny has never cast a stain—of his depriving himself of every indulgence, content with the hardest couch and roughest clothing, and just enough of the plainest food to support life—without remembering the camel's cloth, the locusts, and wild honey of the Baptist.

If John's lot was cast on evil days, when religion suffered most in the house of her friends, so was it with Savonarola. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witnessed the increasing corruption and licentiousness of popes and clergy. The offices of cardinal and bishop were put up to auction, and sold to the highest bidder. The bishop extorted money from the priests, and these robbed the people. The grossest immorality was prevalent in all ranks of the Church, and without concealment. Even the monasteries and convents were often dens of vice. "Italy," said Machiavelli, "has lost all piety and all religion. We have to thank the Church and the priests for our abandoned wickedness."

As John beheld the fire and fan of impending judgment, so the burden of Savonarola's preaching was that the Church was about to be chastised, and afterwards renewed. So powerful was this impression on the

preacher's mind that it can best be described in his own words as a *vision*. He tells us that on one occasion the heavens seemed to open before him, and there appeared a representation of the calamities that were coming on the Church; on another, he saw, in the middle of the sky, a hand bearing a sword, on which words of doom were written. He described himself as one who looked into the invisible world.

The Herald of Jesus possessed a marvellous eloquence, beneath which the whole land was moved; and so it was with Savonarola. During the eight years that he preached in the cathedral, it was thronged with vast crowds; and as he pleaded for purity of life and simplicity of manners, "women threw aside jewels and finery, libertines were transformed into sober citizens, bankers and tradesmen restored their ill-gotten gains."

In Lent, 1497, took place what is known as the Burning of the Vanities. Bands of children were sent forth to collect from all parts of the city, indecent books and pictures, carnival masks and costumes, cards, dice, and all such things. A pile was erected, sixty feet in height and fired amid the sound of trumpets and pealing bells.

What Herod was to John the Baptist, the Pope and the magnificent Lorenzo di Medici were to Savonarola. The latter seems to have felt a strange fascination towards the eloquent preacher, tried to attach him to his court, was frequent in his attendances at San Marco, and gave largely to his offertories. To use the words of the New Testament, he feared him, "knowing that

he was a righteous man, and a holy" (Mark vi. 20). But Savonarola took care to avoid any sign of compliance or compromise; declined to pay homage to Lorenzo for promotion to high ecclesiastical functions; returned his gold from the offertories; and when they ran to tell him that Lorenzo was walking in the convent garden, answered, "If he has not asked for me, do not disturb his meditations or mine."

Like John, Savonarola was unceasing in his denunciation of the hypocritical religion which satisfied itself with outward observances. "I tell you," he said, "that the Lord willeth not that ye fast on such a day or at such an hour; but willeth that ye avoid sin all the days of your life. Observe how they go about—seeking indulgences and pardons, ringing bells, decking altars, dressing churches. God heedeth not your ceremonies."

John's exhortation to "Behold the Lamb of God" finds an echo in the noble utterance of this illumined soul, who, be it remembered, anticipated Luther's Reformation by a hundred years. "If all the ecclesiastical hierarchy be corrupt, the believer must turn to Christ, who is the primary cause, and say: 'Thou art my Priest and my Confessor.'"

The fate of martyrdom that befell John was awarded also to Savonarola. Through the impetuosity of his followers, he was involved in a challenge to ordeal by fire. But by the manœuvres of his foes, the expectations of the populace in this direction were disappointed, and their anger aroused. "To San Marco!"

shouted their leaders. To San Marco they went, fired the buildings, burst open the doors, fought their way into the cloisters and church, dragged Savonarola from his devotions, and thrust him into a loathsome dungeon. After languishing there, amid every indignity and torture, for some weeks, on May 23, 1498, he was led forth to die. The bishop, whose duty it was to pronounce his degradation, stumbled at the formula, declaring—"I separate thee from the Church, militant and triumphant." "From the militant thou mayest, but from the triumphant thou canst not," was the martyr's calm reply. He met his end with unflinching fortitude. He was strangled, his remains hung in chains, burned, and the ashes flung into the river. When the commissioners of the Pope arrived at his trial, they brought with them express orders that he was to die, "even though he were *a second John the Baptist.*" It is thus that the apostate Church has always dealt with her noblest sons. But Truth, struck to the ground, revives. Hers are the eternal years. Within a few years, Luther was nailing his theses at the door of the church at Wittenberg, and the Reformation was on its way.

There is a legend, which at least contains a true suggestion, that when Savonarola was on his way to Florence from Genoa, as a young man, his strength failed him as he was crossing the Apennines, but that a mysterious stranger appeared to him, restored his courage, led him to a hospice, compelled him to take food, and afterwards accompanied him to his destination; but on

reaching the San Gallo gate he vanished, with the words, *Remember to do that for which God hath sent thee!*

The story recalls forcibly the words with which the evangelist John introduces his notice of the forerunner —" There was a man sent from God, whose name was John." Men are always coming, sent from God, specially adapted to their age, and entrusted with the message which the times demand. See to it that thou too realize thy divine mission; for Jesus said, " As the Father hath sent Me, even so send I you." Every true life is a mission from God.

And when we read the words of the apostle Paul about John " fulfilling his course," we may well ask for grace that we may fill up to the brim the measure of our opportunities, that we may realize to the full God's meaning and intention in creating us: and so our lives shall mate with the Divine Ideal, like sublime words with some heavenly strain, each completing the other.

V

The First Ministry of the Baptist.

(Luke iii.)

'Hark, what a sound, and too divine for hearing,
Stirs on the earth and trembles in the air!
Is it the thunder of the Lord's appearing?
Is it the music of his people's prayer?

"Surely He cometh, and a thousand voices
Shout to the saints, and to the deaf and dumb;
Surely He cometh, and the earth rejoices,
Glad in his coming, who hath sworn, I come."

F. W. H. Myers.

THIRTY years had left their mark on the Forerunner. The aged priest and his wife, Elisabeth, had been carried to their grave by other hands than those of the young Nazarite. The story of his miraculous birth, and the expectations it had aroused, had almost died out of the memory of the countryside. For many years John had been living in the caves that indent the limestone rocks of the desolate wilderness which extends from Hebron to the western shores of the Dead Sea. By the use of the scantiest fare, and roughest garb, he had brought his body under complete mastery. From nature, from the inspired

page, and from direct fellowship with God, he had received revelations which are only vouchsafed to those who can stand the strain of discipline in the school of solitude and privation. He had carefully pondered also the signs of the times, of which he received information from the Bedouin and others with whom he came in contact. Blended with all other thoughts, John's heart was filled with the advent of Him, so near akin to himself, who, to his certain knowledge, was growing up, a few months his junior, in an obscure highland home, but who was speedily to be manifested to Israel.

At last the moment arrived for him to utter the mighty burden that pressed upon him; and in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Cæsar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judæa, Herod the Tetrarch of Galilee, Annas and Caiaphas the high priests, "the word of God came unto John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness." It may have befallen thus. One day, as a caravan of pilgrims was slowly climbing the mountain gorges threaded by the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, or halted for a moment in the noontide heat, they were startled by the appearance of a gaunt and sinewy man, with flowing raven locks, and a voice which must have been as sonorous and penetrating as a clarion, who cried, "Repent! the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

It was as though a spark had fallen on dry timber. The tidings spread with wonderful rapidity that in the

wilderness of Judæa one was to be met who recalled the memory of the great prophets, and whose burning eloquence was of the same order as of Isaiah or Ezekiel. Instantly people began to flock to him from all sides. "There went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judæa, and all the region round about Jordan." The neighbourhood suddenly became black with hurrying crowds—as Klondike, when the news of the discovery of gold began to spread. From lip to lip the tidings sped of a great leader and preacher, who had suddenly appeared.

He seems finally to have taken his stand not far from the rose-clad oasis of Jericho, on the banks of the Jordan; and men of every tribe, class, and profession, gathered thither, listening eagerly, or interrupting him with loud cries for help. The population of the metropolis, familiar with the Temple services, and accustomed to the splendour of the Palace; fishermen from the Lake of Gennesaret; dusky sons of Ishmael from the desert of Gilead; the proud Pharisee; the detested publican, who had fattened on the sorrows and burdens of the people—were there, together with crowds of ordinary people that could find no resting-place in the schools or systems of religious thought of which Jerusalem was the centre.

I. Many Causes accounted for John's immense Popularity.—*The office of the prophet was almost obsolete.* Several centuries, as we have seen, had

passed since the last great prophet had finished his testimony. The oldest man living at that time could not remember having seen a man who had ever spoken to a prophet. It seemed as unlikely, to adopt the phrase of another, that another prophet should arise in that formal, materialistic age as that another Gothic cathedral should be added to the splendid remains of Gothic glory which tell us of those bygone days when there were giants in the land.

Moreover, *John gave such abundant evidence of sincerity—of reality.* His independence of anything that this world could give made men feel that whatever he said was inspired by his direct contact with things as they literally are. It was certain that his severe and lonely life had rent the vail, and given him the knowledge of facts and realities, which were as yet hidden from ordinary men, though waiting, soon to be revealed; and it was equally certain that his words were a faithful and adequate presentation of what he saw. He spoke what he knew, and testified what he had seen. His accent of conviction was unmistakable. When men see the professed prophet of the Unseen and Eternal as keen after his own interests as any worldling, shrewd at a bargain, captivated by show, obsequious to the titled and wealthy; when they discover the man who predicts the dissolution of all things carefully investing the proceeds of the books in which he publishes his predictions—they are apt to reduce to a minimum their faith in his words. But there was no trace of this

in the Baptist, and therefore the people went forth to him.

Above all, he appealed to their moral convictions, and, indeed, expressed them. The people knew that they were not as they should be. For a long time this consciousness had been gaining ground; and now they flocked around the man who revealed themselves to themselves, and indicated with unfaltering decision the course of action they should adopt. How marvellous is the fascination which *he* exerts over men who will speak to their innermost souls! This has always been the source of power to the great orators of the Romish Church—men like Massillon, for instance—and to refuse to use this method of approach is to forego one of the mightiest weapons in the repertory of Christian appeal. If we deal only with the intellect or imagination, the novelist or essayist may successfully compete with us. It is in his direct appeal to the heart and conscience that the servant of God exerts his supreme and unrivalled power. Though a man may shrink from the preaching of repentance, yet, if it tell the truth about himself, he will be irresistibly attracted to hear the voice that harrows his soul. John rebuked Herod for many things; but still the royal offender sent for him again and again, and heard him gladly.

It is expressly said that John saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism (Matt. iii, 7). Their advent appears to have caused him some surprise. "Ye offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from

the wrath to come?" The strong epithet he used of them suggests that they came as critics; because they were unwilling to surrender the leadership of the religious life of Israel, and were anxious to keep in touch with the new movement, until they could sap its vitality, or divert its force into the channels of their own influence.

But it is quite likely that in many cases there were deeper reasons. *The Pharisees* were the ritualists and formalists of their day, who would wrangle about the breadth of a phylactery, and decide to an inch how far a man might walk on the Sabbath day; but the mere externals of religion will never permanently satisfy the soul made in the likeness of God. Ultimately it will turn from them with a great nausea and an insatiable desire for the living God. As for *the Sadducees,* they were materialists of their time. The reaction of superstition, it has been said, is to infidelity; and the reaction from Pharisaism was to Sadduceeism. Disgusted and outraged by the trifling of the literalists of Scripture interpretation, the Sadducee denied that there was an eternal world and a spiritual state, and asserted that "there is no resurrection, neither angel nor spirit." But mere negation can never satisfy. The heart still moans out its sorrow under the darkness of agnosticism, as the ocean sighing under a starless midnight. Nature's instincts are more cogent than reason. It was hardly to be wondered at, then, that these two great

classes were largely represented in the crowds that gathered on the banks of the Jordan.

II. LET US BRIEFLY ENUMERATE THE MAIN BURDEN OF THE BAPTIST'S PREACHING.—(1) "*The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.*" To a Jew that phrase meant the re-establishment of the theocracy, and a return to those great days in the history of his people when God Himself was Lawgiver and King. Had not Daniel predicted that in the days of the last of the great empires, prefigured in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, the God of heaven would set up a kingdom which should never be destroyed—which should break in pieces all other kingdoms and stand for ever? Had he not foreseen a time when one like unto a son of man should come to the Ancient of Days to receive a dominion which should not pass away, and a kingdom which should not be destroyed? Had he not foretold that the greatness of kingdoms under the whole heaven should be given to the saints of the Most High? Surely, then, all these anticipations were on the eve of fulfilment. The long-expected Messiah was at hand; and here was the forerunner described by Isaiah, the prophet, saying:—

> "The voice of one crying in the wilderness,
> Make ye ready the way of the Lord,
> Make his paths straight."

But some misgiving must have passed over the minds of his hearers when they heard the young prophet's

description of the conditions and accompaniments of that long-looked-for reign. Instead of dilating on the material glory of the Messianic period, far surpassing the magnificent splendour of Solomon, he insisted on the fulfilment of certain necessary preliminary requirements, which lifted the whole conception of the anticipated reign to a new level, in which the inward and spiritual took precedence of the outward and material. It was the old lesson, which in every age requires repetition, that unless a man is born again, and from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Be sure of this, that no outward circumstances, however propitious and favourable, can bring about true blessedness. We might be put into the midst of heaven itself, and be poor, and miserable, and blind, and naked, unless the heart were in loving union with the Lamb, who is in the midst of the throne. He is the light of that city, his countenance doth lighten it—from his throne the river of its pleasure flows, his service is its delightful business; and to be out of fellowship with Him, would make us out of harmony with its joy. Life must be centered in Christ if it is to be concentric with all the circles of heaven's bliss. We can never be at rest or happy whilst we expect to find our fresh springs in outward circumstances. It is only when we are right with God that we are blest and at rest. Righteousness is blessedness. Where the King is enthroned within the heart, the soul is in the kingdom, which is righteousness, joy, and peace in the Holy Ghost; nay,

perhaps more accurately, that kingdom is in the soul. And when all hearts are yielded to the King; when all gates lift up their heads, and all everlasting doors are unfolded for his entrance—then the curse which has so long brooded over the world shall be done away. The whole creation groaneth and travaileth for the manifestation of the sons of God: but when they are revealed in all their beauty, then judgment shall dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness shall abide in the fruitful field; and the work of righteousness shall be peace, and the effect of righteousness quietness and confidence for ever; and the mirage shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water (Isa. xxxii. 15, 16; xxxv. 7, R. V.).

(2) Alongside the proclamation of the kingdom was the uncompromising insistence on "*the wrath to come.*" John saw that the Advent of the King would bring inevitable suffering to those who were living in self-indulgence and sin.

There would be careful discrimination. He who was coming would carefully discern between the righteous and the wicked; between those who served God and those who served Him not: and the preacher enforced his words by an image familiar to orientals. When the wheat is reaped, it is bound in sheaves and carted to the threshing-floor, which is generally a circular spot of hard ground from fifty to one hundred feet in diameter. On this the wheat is threshed from the chaff by manual labour, but the two lie intermin-

gled till the evening, when the grain is caught up in broad shovels or fans, and thrown against the evening breeze, as it passes swiftly over the fevered land; thus the light chaff is borne away, whilst the wheat falls heavily to the earth. Likewise, cried the Baptist, there shall be a very careful process of discrimination, before the unquenchable fires are lighted; so that none but chaff shall be consigned to the flames—a prediction which was faithfully fulfilled. At first Christ drew all men to Himself; but, as his ministry proceeded, He revealed their quality. A few were permanently attracted to Him; the majority were as definitely repelled. There was no middle class. Men were either for or against Him. The sheep on this side; the goats on that. The five wise virgins, and the five foolish. Those who entered the strait gate, and those who flocked down the broad way that leadeth to destruction. So it has been in every age. Jesus Christ is the touchstone of trial. Our attitude towards Him reveals the true quality of the soul.

There would also be a period of probation. "The axe laid to the root of the trees" is familiar enough to those who know anything of forestry. The woodsman barks some tree which seems to him to be occupying space capable of being put to better use. There is no undue haste. It is only after severe and searching scrutiny that the word goes forth: "Cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?" But when once that word is spoken, there is no appeal. The Jewish people had

become sadly unfruitful; but a definite period was to intervene—three years of Christ's ministry and thirty years beside—before the threatened judgment befell. All this while the axe lay ready for its final stroke; but only when all hope of reformation was abandoned was it driven home, and the nation crashed to its doom.

Perhaps this may be the case with one of my readers. You have been planted on a favourable site, and have drunk in the dews and rain and sunshine of God's providence; but what fruit have you yielded in return? How have you repaid the heavenly Husbandman? May He not be considering whether any result will accrue from prolonging your opportunities for bearing fruit? He has looked for grapes, and lo, you have brought forth only wild grapes; He may well consider the advisability of removing you from the stewardship, which you have used for your own emolument, and not for his glory.

For all such there must be "wrath to come." After there has been searching scrutiny and investigation, and every reasonable chance has been given for amendment, and still the soul is impenitent and disobedient, there must be a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation which shall devour the adversaries.

The fire of John's preaching had its primary fulfilment, probably, in the awful disasters which befell the Jewish people, culminating in the siege and fall of Jerusalem. We know how marvellously the little handful

of believers which had been gathered out by the preaching of Christ and his disciples were accounted worthy to escape all those things that came to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man. But the unbelieving mass of the Jewish people were discovered to be worthless chaff and unfruitful trees, and were assigned to those terrible fires which have left a scar on Palestine to this day.

But there was a deeper meaning. The wrath of God avenges itself, not on nations but on individual sinners. "He that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him." The penalty of sin is inevitable. The wages of sin is death. The land which beareth thorns and thistles after having drunk of the rain which cometh often upon it, is rejected and nigh unto a curse, its end is to be burned; under the first covenant, every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward; the man that set at nought Moses' law died without compassion, on the word of two or three witnesses—of how much sorer punishment shall he be judged worthy who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant an unholy thing, and done despite to the Spirit of grace! Even if we grant, which of course we must do, that many of the expressions referring to the ultimate fate of the ungodly are symbolical, yet it must be granted also, that they have counterparts in the realm of soul and spirit, which are as terrible to endure, as the nature of the soul is more highly

organized than that of the body. Fire to the body is easy to bear in comparison with certain forms of suffering to which the heart and soul are sometimes exposed even in this life. Have we not sometimes said, "If physical suffering were concerned, we could bear it; but oh, this pain which is gnawing at the heart—this awful inward agony, which burns like fire!" And if we are capable of suffering so acutely from remorse and shame, from ingratitude and misrepresentation, in this life where there are so many distractions and temporary alleviations, what may not be the possibility of pain in that other life, where there is no screen, no covering, no alleviation, no cup of water to slake the thirst! Believe me, when Jesus said, "These shall go away into eternal punishment," He contemplated a retribution so terrible, that it were good for the sufferers if they had never been born.

All the great preachers have seen and faithfully borne witness to the fearful results of sin, as they take effect in this life and the next. These threw Brainerd into a dripping sweat, whilst praying on a cool day for his Indians in the woods; these drew John Welsh from his bed, at all hours of the night, to plead for his people; these inspired Baxter to write his *Call to the Unconverted;* these drew Henry Martyn from his fellowship at Cambridge to the burning plains of India; these forced tears from Whitefield as he preached to the crowding thousands; these burn in the memorable sermon by Jonathan Edwards on "Sinners in the hands

of an angry God." The notable revival which broke out at Kirk o' Shotts was due, under God, to Livingston congratulating the people that drops of rain alone were falling, and not the Fire of Divine wrath. The sermons of Ralph Erskine, of McCheyne, and W. C. Burns, of Brownlow North, and Reginald Radcliffe, in the last generation, were characterized by the same appeals. Though, on the other hand, because God is not confined to any one method, the preaching of the late D. L. Moody was specially steeped in the love of God. It is for want of a vision of the inevitable fate of the godless and disobedient, that much of our present-day preaching is so powerless and ephemeral. You cannot get crops out of the land merely by summer showers and sunshine; there must be the subsoil ploughing, the pulverizing frost, the wild March wind. And only when we modern preachers have seen sin as God sees it, and begin to apply the divine standard to the human conscience; only when our eagerness and yearning well over into our eyes and broken tones; only when we know the terror of the Lord, and begin to persuade men as though we would pluck them out of the fire, by our strenuous expostulation and entreaties—shall we see the effects that followed the preaching of the Baptist when soldiers, publicans, Pharisees, and scribes, crowded around him, saying, "What shall we do?"

All John's preaching, therefore, led up to the demand for repentance. The word which was oftenest on his

lips was "Repent ye!" It was not enough to plead direct descent from Abraham, or outward conformity with the Levitical and Temple rights. God could raise up children to Abraham from the stones of the river bank. There must be the renunciation of sin, the definite turning to God, the bringing forth of fruit meet for an amended life. In no other way could the people be prepared for the coming of the Lord.

VI

Baptism unto Repentance.

(Mark i. 4.)

"The last and greatest herald of heaven's King,
Girt with rough skins, hies to the desert wild;
Among that savage brood the woods doth bring,
Which he more harmless, found than man, and mild.

"His food was locusts and what there doth spring,
With honey that from virgin hives distill'd,
Parch'd body, hollow eyes, some uncouth thing
Made him appear, long since from earth exiled."

W. Drummond, of Hawthornden.

AT the time of which we are speaking, an extraordinary sect, known as the Essenes, was scattered throughout Palestine, but had its special home in the oasis of Engedi; and with the adherents of this community John must have been in frequent association. They were the recluses or hermits of their age.

The aim of the Essene was moral and ceremonial purity. They sought after an ideal of holiness, which they thought could not be realized in this world; and therefore, leaving villages and towns, they betook themselves to the dens and caves of the earth, and gave themselves to continue, abstinence, fastings, and

prayers, supporting themselves by some slight labours on the land. Those who have investigated their interesting history tell us that the cardinal point with them was faith in the inspired Word of God. By meditation, prayer, and mortification, frequent ablutions, and strict attention to the laws of ceremonial purity, they hoped to reach the highest stage of communion with God. They agreed with the Pharisees in their extraordinary regard for the Sabbath. Their daily meal was of the simplest kind, and partaken of in their house of religious assembly. After bathing, with prayer and exhortation they went, with veiled faces, to their dining-room, as to a holy temple. They abstained from oaths, despised riches, manifested the greatest abhorrence of war and slavery, faced torture and death with the utmost bravery, refused the indulgence of pleasure.

It is clear that John was not a member of this holy community, which differed widely from the Pharisaism and Sadduceeism of the time. The Essenes wore white robes, emblematic of the purity they sought; whilst he was content with his coat of camel's hair and leathern girdle. They seasoned their bread with hyssop, and he with honey. They dwelt in brotherhoods and societies; whilst he stood alone from the earliest days of his career. But it cannot be doubted that he was in deep accord with much of the doctrine and practice of this sect.

John the Baptist, however, cannot be accounted for by any of the pre-existing conditions of his time. He

stood alone in his God-given might. That he was conscious of this appears from his own declaration when he said, "He that sent me to baptize with water, He said unto me." And that Christ wished to convey the same impression is clear from his question to the Pharisees: "The baptism of John, was it from heaven or from men?" Moreover, the distinct assertion of the Spirit of God, through the fourth Evangelist, informs us: "There came a man, sent from God, whose name was John; the same came for witness, that *all* might believe through him." "The Word of God came unto John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. And he came."

I. The Summons to Repent.—John has a ministry with all men. In other words, he represents a phase of teaching and influence through which we must needs pass if we are properly to discover and appreciate the grace of Christ. With us, too, a preparatory work has to be done. There are mountains and hills of pride and self-will that have to be levelled; crooked and devious ways that have to be straightened; ruggednesses that have to be smoothed—before we can fully behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. In proportion to the thoroughness and permanence of our repentance will be our glad realization of the fulness and glory of the Lamb of God.

But we must guard ourselves here, lest it be supposed that repentance is a species of good work which

must be performed in order that we may merit the grace of Christ. It must be made equally clear, that repentance must not be viewed apart from faith in the Saviour, which is an integral part of it. It is also certain that, though "God commandeth all men everywhere to repent," yet Jesus is exalted "to *give* repentance and the remission of sins."

Repentance, according to the literal rendering of the Greek word, is "a change of mind." Perhaps we should rather say, it is a change in the attitude of the will. The unrepentant soul chooses its own way and will, regardless of the law of God. "The mind of the flesh is enmity against God, for it is not subject to the law of God, neither, indeed, can it be; and they that are in the flesh cannot please God." But in repentance the soul changes its attitude. It no longer refuses the yoke of God's will, like a restive heifer, but yields to it, or is willing to yield. There is a compunction, a sense of the hollowness of all created things, a relenting, a wistful yearning after the true life, and ultimately a turning from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God. The habits may rebel; the inclinations and emotions may shrink back; the consciousness of peace and joy may yet be far away—but the will has made its secret decision, and has begun to turn to God; as, in the revolution of the earth, the place where we live reaches its furthest point from the sunlight, passes it, and begins slowly to return towards its warm smiles and embrace.

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that repentance is an act of the *will*. In its beginning there may be no sense of gladness or reconciliation with God: but just the consciousness that certain ways of life are wrong, mistaken, hurtful, and grieving to God; and the desire, which becomes the determination, to turn from them, to seek Him who formed the mountains and created the wind, that maketh the morning darkness and treadeth upon the high places of the earth.

Repentance may be accounted as the other side of faith. They are the two sides of the same coin: the two aspects of the same act. If the act of the soul which brings it into right relation with God is described as a turning round, to go in the reverse direction to that in which it had been travelling, then *repentance* stands for its desire and choice to turn from sin, and *faith* for its desire and choice to turn to God. We must be willing to turn from sin and our own righteousness—that is *repentance;* we must be willing to be saved by God, in his own way, and must come to Him for that purpose—that is *faith.*

We need to turn from our own righteousnesses as well as from our sins. Augustine spoke of his efforts after righteousness as splendid sins; and Paul distinctly disavows all those attempts to stand right with God which he made before he saw the face of the risen Christ looking out from heaven upon his conscience-stricken spirit. You must turn away from your own efforts to save yourself. These are, in the words of the prophet,

but "filthy rags." Nothing, apart from the words of the Saviour, can avail the soul, which must meet the scrutiny of eternal justice and purity.

Repentance is produced sometimes and specially by the presentation of the claims of Christ. We suddenly awake to realize what He is, how He loves, how much we are missing, the gross ingratitude with which we respond to his agony and bloody sweat, the beauty of his character, the strength of his claims.

At other times repentance is wrought by the preaching of John the Baptist. Then we hear of the axe laid at the root of the trees, and the unquenchable fire for the consuming of the chaff: and the heart trembles. Then we are led to the brink of the precipice, and compelled to see the point at which the primrose-path we are travelling ends in the fatal abyss. Then our faith in our hereditary position and privilege is shattered by the iconoclasm of the preacher; and we are levelled to the position of stones which are lapped by the Jordan, but are insensible to its touch. It is at such a time as this that the soul sees the entire fabric of its vain confidences and hopes crumbling like a cloud-palace, and turns from it all—as Mary from the sepulchre, where her hopes lay entombed, to find Jesus standing with the resurrection glory on his face and radiant love in his eyes.

For purposes of clear thinking it is well to discriminate in our use of the words Repentance and Penitence, using the former of the first act of the will, when,

energized and quickened by the Spirit of God, it turns from dead works to serve the living and true God; and the latter, of the emotions which are powerfully wrought upon, as the years pass, by the Spirit's presentation of all the pain and grief which our sin has caused, and is causing, to our blessed Lord. We repent once, but are penitents always. We repent in the will; we are penitent in the heart. We repent, and believe the Gospel; we believe the Gospel of the Son of Man, and as we look on Him, whom our sins have pierced, we mourn. We repent when we obey his call to come unto Him and live; we are penitent as we stand behind Him weeping, and begin to wash his feet with our tears, and to wipe them with the hair of our head.

If John the Baptist has never wrought his work in you, be sure to open your heart to his piercing voice. Let him fulfil his ministry. See that you do not reject the counsel of God, as it proceeds from his lips; but expose your soul to its searching scrutiny, and allow it to have free and uninterrupted course. He comes to prepare the way of the Lord, and to make through the desert of our nature a highway for our God. Of course, if, from the earliest you have been under the nurture of pious parents, and your young heart turned to God in the early dawn of consciousness, you will not pass through these experiences as those must who have spent years in the service of Satan. For these there is but one word—Repent! They must, in a mo-

ment of time, take up an entirely different attitude to God and holiness, to Christ and his salvation.

II. The Signs and Symptoms of Repentance.—(1) *Confession.* "They were baptized of him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." What this precisely means it is not possible to say in detail; but it is not improbable that beneath the strong pressure of inward remorse and bitterness of spirit, men of notoriously bad life, as well as those who had never abandoned themselves to the mad currents of temptation, but were none the less conscious of heart and hidden sins, stood up, "confessing and declaring their deeds," as in a memorable scene long afterwards (Acts xix. 17-20).

The formalist confessed that the whited sepulchre of his religious observations had concealed a mass of putrefaction. The sceptic confessed that his refusal of religion was largely due to his hatred of the demands of God's holy law. The multitudes confessed that they had been selfish and sensual, shutting up their compassions, and refusing clothing and food to the needy. The publican confessed that he had extorted by false accusation and oppression more than his due. The soldier confessed that his profession had often served as the cloak for terrorizing the poor and vamping up worthless accusations. The notoriously evil-liver confessed that he had lain in wait for blood, and destroyed the innocent and helpless for gain or hate. The air

was laden with the cries and sighs of the stricken multitudes, who beheld their sin for the first time in the light of eternity and of its inevitable doom. The lurid flames of "the wrath to come" cast their searching light on practices which, in the comparative twilight of ignorance and neglect, had passed without special notice.

Upon that river's brink, men not only confessed to God, but probably also to one another. Life-long feuds were reconciled; old quarrels were settled; frank words of apology and forgiveness were exchanged; hands grasped hands for the first time after years of alienation and strife.

Confession is an essential sign of a genuine repentance, and without it forgiveness is impossible. "He that covereth his transgressions shall not prosper; but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall obtain mercy." "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." So long as we keep silence, our bones wax old through our inward anguish; we are burnt by the fire of slow fever; we toss restlessly, though on a couch of down. But on confession there is immediate relief. "I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord, and Thou forgavest me the iniquity of my sin."

Confess your sin to God, O troubled soul, from whom the vision of Christ is veiled. It is more than likely that some undetected or unconfessed sin is shut-

ting out the rays of the true sun. Excuse nothing, extenuate nothing, omit nothing. Do not speak of mistakes of judgment, but of lapses of heart and will. Do not be content with a general confession; be particular and specific. Drag each evil thing forth before God's judgment bar; let the secrets be exposed, and the dark, sad story told. Begin at the beginning, and go steadily through. Only be very careful to leave no trace of your experiences for human eyes or ears. To tell this story to another will rob it of its value to yourself and its acceptableness to God. It is enough for God to know it; and to tell Him all is to receive at once his assurance of forgiveness, for the sake of Him who loved us and gave Himself a propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but for those of the whole world. Directly the confession leaves our heart, nay, whilst it is in process, the Divine voice is heard assuring us that our sins, which are many, are put away as far as the east is from the west, and cast into the depths of the sea.

But such confession should not be made to God alone, when sins are in question which have injured and alienated others. If our brother has aught against us, we must find him out, while our gift is left unpresented at the altar, and first be reconciled to him. We must write the letter, or speak the word; we must make honorable reparation and amends; we must not be behind the sinners under the old law, who were bidden to add a fifth part to the loss their brother had sustained

through their wrong-doing, when they made it good. The only sin we are justified in confessing to our brother man is that we have committed against him. All else must be told in the ear of Jesus, that great High Priest, whose confessional is always open, and whose pure ear can receive our dark and sad stories without taint or soil.

(2) *Fruits worthy of Repentance.* "Bring forth, therefore, fruit worthy of repentance," said John, with some indignation, as he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism. He insisted that practical and vital religion was not a rule, but a life; not outward ritual, but a principle; not works, but fruit; and he demanded that the genuineness of repentance should be attested by appropriate fruit. "Do men gather grapes of thorns, and figs of thistles?"

Probably that demand of the Baptist accounted for the alteration in his life of which Zaccheus made confession to Christ, when He became his guest. The rich publican lived at Jericho, near which John was baptizing, and he was probably amongst the publicans who were attracted to his ministry. How well we can imagine the comments that would be passed on his presence, as each nudged his neighbour and whispered. "Is not that Zaccheus?" said one. "What is he doing here?" said another. "It is about time *he* came to himself," muttered a third. "I wish the Baptist could do something for him," said a fourth.

And something touched that hardened heart. A

great hope and a great resolve sprang up in it. He may have joined in the confessions which we have spoken, but he did more. On his arrival at Jericho he was a new man. He gave the half of his goods to feed the poor; and if he had wrongfully exacted aught of any man, he restored fourfold. His servant was often seen in the lowest and poorest parts of the old city, hunting up cases of urgent distress, and bestowing anonymous alms; and many a poor man was delighted to find a considerable sum of money thrust into his hands, with a scrap of paper signed by the rich taxgatherer, saying, "I took so much from you, years ago, to which I had no claim; kindly find it enclosed, with fourfold as amends." Should any ask him the reason for it all, he would answer, "Ah, I have been down to the Jordan and heard the Baptist; I believe the Kingdom is coming, and the King is at hand; and I want to make ready for Him, so that, when He comes, He may be able to abide at my house."

You will never get right with God till you are right with man. It is not enough to confess wrong-doing; you must be prepared to make amends so far as lies in your power. Sin is not a light thing, and it must be dealt with, root and branch.

(3) *The baptism of repentance.* "They were baptized . . . confessing their sins." The cleansing property of water has given it a religious significance from most remote antiquity. Men have conceived of sin as a foul stain upon the heart, and have couched

their petitions for its removal in words derived from its use: "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean. Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." They have longed to feel that as the body was delivered from pollution, so the soul was freed from stain. In some cases this thought has assumed a gross and material form; and men have attributed to the water of certain rivers, such as the Ganges, the Nile, the Abana, the mysterious power of cleansing away sin.

There was no trace of this, however, in John's teaching. It was not baptism *unto remission,* but *unto repentance.* It was the expression and symbol of the soul's desire and intention, so far as it knew, to confess and renounce its sins, as the necessary condition of obtaining the Divine forgiveness.

It is not necessary to discuss the much-vexed question of the source from which the Baptist derived his baptism—some say it was from the habits of the Essenes, or the practice of the Rabbis, who subjected to this rite all proselytes to Judaism from the Gentile world. It is enough for us to remember that he was *sent* to baptize, that the idea of his baptism was "from heaven," and that in his hands the rite assumed altogether novel and important functions. It meant death and burial as far as the past was concerned; and resurrection to a new and better future. Forgetting and dying to the things that were behind, the soul was urged to realize the meaning of this symbolic act, and to press on and up to better things before; assured

as it did so that God had accepted its confession and choice, and was waiting to receive it graciously and love it freely.

It is easy to see how all this appealed to the people, and specially touched the hearts of young men. At that time, by the blue waters of the Lake of Galilee, there was a handful of ardent youths, deeply stirred by the currents of thought around them, who resented the Roman sway, and were on the tip-toe of expectation for the coming Kingdom. How they spoke together, as they floated at night in their fisherman's yawl over the dark waters of the Lake of Galilee, about God's ancient covenant, and the advent of the Messiah, and the corruptions of their beloved Temple service! And when, one day, tidings reached them of this strange new preacher, they left all and streamed with all the world beside to the Jordan valley, and stood fascinated by the spell of his words.

One by one, or all together, they made themselves known to him, and became his loyal friends and disciples. We are familiar with the names of one or two of them, who afterwards left their earlier master to follow Christ; but of the rest we know nothing, save that he taught them to fast and pray, and that they clung to their great teacher, until they bore his headless body to the grave. At his death they joined themselves with Him whom they had once regarded with some suspicion as his rival and supplanter.

How much this meant to John! He had never had

a friend; and to have the allegiance and love of these noble, ingenuous youths must have been very grateful to his soul. But from them all he repeatedly turned his gaze, as though he were looking for some one who must presently emerge from the crowd; and the sound of whose voice would give him the deepest and richest fulfilment of his joy, because it would be the voice of the Bridegroom Himself.

VII

The Manifestation of the Messiah.

(John i. 31.)

"Before me, as in darkening glass,
Some glorious outlines pass,
Of love, and truth, and holiness, and power—
I own them thine, O Christ,
And bless Thee in this hour."

F. R. Havergal.

JOHN'S life, at this period, was an extraordinary one. By day he preached to the teeming crowds, or baptized them; by night he would sleep in some slight booth, or darksome cave. But the conviction grew always stronger in his soul, that the Messiah was near to come; and this conviction became a revelation. The Holy Spirit who filled him, taught him. He began to see the outlines of his Person and work. As he thought upon Him, beneath the gracious teaching of Him who had sent him to baptize (John i. 33), the dim characteristics of his glorious personality glimmered out on the sensitive plate of his inner consciousness, and he could even describe Him to others, as well as delineate Him for himself.

He conceived of the coming King, as we have seen, as the Woodsman, laying his axe at the root of the trees; as the Husbandman, fan in hand to winnow the threshing floor; as the Baptist, prepared to plunge all faithful souls in his cleansing fires; as the Ancient of Days, who, though coming after him in order of time, must be preferred before him in order of precedence, because He was before him in the Eternal Glory of his Being (John i. 15-30).

It was this vision of the Sun, before the sunrise, as he viewed it from the high peak of his own noble character, that induced in the herald his conspicuous and beautiful humility. He insisted that he was not worthy to perform the most menial service for Him whose advent he announced. "I am content," he said in effect, "to be a voice, raised for a moment to proclaim the King, and soon dying on the desert air, whilst the person of the crier is unnoticed and unsought for; but I may not presume to unloose the latchet of his shoes. . . . 'There cometh after me He that is mightier than I, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose.'"

John was not only humble in his self-estimate, but also in his modest appreciation of the results of his work. It was only transient and preparatory. It was given him to do; but it would soon be done. His course was a short one, and it would soon be fulfilled (Acts xiii. 25). His simple mission was to bid the people to believe on Him who should come after him

(xix. 4). He was the morning star ushering in the day, but destined to fade in the glory of ruddy dawn, flooding the eastern sky.

But our impression of the sublime humility of this great soul will become deeper, as we consider that marvellous scene in which he first recognized the divine mission and claims of his Kinsman, Jesus of Nazareth. Consider the meeting between the Sun and the star, and take it as indicating an experience which must always supervene on the cleansed and holy soul, which desires and prepares for it.

I. Our Lord's Advent to the Jordan Bank.—For thirty years the Son of Man had been about his Father's business in the ordinary routine of a village carpenter's life. He had found scope enough there for his marvellously rich and deep nature; reminding us of the philosopher's garden, which, though only a dingy court in a crowded city, reached through to the other side of the world on the one hand, and up to the heaven of God on the other. Often He must have felt the strong attraction of the great world of men, which He loved; and the wild winds, as they careered over his village home, must have often borne to Him the wail of broken hearts, asking Him to hasten to their relief. On his ear must have struck the voices of Jairuses pleading for their only daughters; of sisters interceding for their Lazaruses; of halt and lame and blind entreating that He would come and heal them.

But He waited still, his eye on the dial-plate of the clock, till the time was fulfilled which had been fixed in the Eternal Council Chamber.

As soon, however, as the rumours of the Baptist's ministry reached Him, and He knew that the porter had taken up his position at the door of the sheepfold, ready to admit the true Shepherd (John x. 3), He could hesitate no longer. The Shechinah cloud was gathering up its fleecy folds, and poising itself above Him, and moving slowly towards the scene of the Baptist's ministry; and He had no alternative but to follow. He must tear Himself away from Nazareth, home, and mother, and take the road, which would end only at Calvary. "Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to the Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him."

Tradition locates the scene of John's baptism as near Jericho, where the water is shallow and the water opens out into large lagoons. But some, inferring that Nazareth was within a day's journey of this notable spot, place it nearer the southern end of the Lake of Galilee.

It may have been in the late afternoon when Jesus arrived. An expression made use of by the evangelist Luke might seem to suggest that all the people had been baptized for that day at least (Luke iii. 21); so that perhaps the crowds had dispersed, and the great prophet was alone with one or two of those young disciples of whom we have spoken. Or, Jesus may have arrived when the Jordan banks were alive with the

eager multitudes. But, in either case, a sudden and remarkable change passed over the Baptist's face as he beheld his Kinsman standing there.

Picture that remarkable scene. The arrowy stream, rushing down from the Lake of Galilee to the Dead Sea; the rugged banks; the shadowy forests; the erect, sinewy form of the Baptist; and Jesus of Nazareth, as depicted by the olden traditions, with auburn hair, searching blue eye, strong, sweet face, and all the beauty of his young manhood. At the sight of Him, note how the high look on the Baptist's face lowers; how his figure stoops in involuntary obeisance; how the voice that was wont to ring out its messages in accents of uncompromising decision falters and trembles!

John said, "I knew Him not" (John i. 31); but this need not be interpreted as indicating that he had no acquaintance whatever with his blameless relative. Such may have been the case, of course, since John's life had been spent apart from the haunts of men. It is more natural to suppose that the cousins had often met, as boys and afterwards. But the Baptist had never realized that Jesus was the Messiah whose advent he was sent to announce. He had not recognized his high descent and claims. It had never occurred to him that this simple village Carpenter, so closely related to himself, whose course of life was apparently so absolutely ordinary and commonplace, could be He of whom Moses in the Law and the Prophets did write.

In this sense John could truly say, "I knew Him not."

But John knew enough of Him to be aware of his guileless, blameless life. The story of his tender love for Mary; of his devotion to the interests of his brothers and sisters; of his undefiled purity; of his long vigils on the mountains till the morning called Him back to his toils; of his deep acquaintance with Scripture; of his speech about the Father—had reached the Baptist's ears. He had come to entertain the profoundest respect amounting to veneration for his Kinsman; and, as He presented Himself for baptism, John felt that there was a whole heaven of difference between Him and all others. These publicans and sinners, these Pharisees and Scribes, these soldiers and common people—had every need to repent, confess, and be forgiven; but there was surely no such need for Him, who had been always, and by general acknowledgment, "holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners." "I have need," said he, "to be baptized of Thee, and comest Thou to me?" (Matt. iii. 14).

There may have been, besides, an indescribable presentiment that stole over that lofty nature—like that knowledge of good men and bad which is often given to noble women. He knew men; his eagle eye had searched their hearts, as he had heard them confess their sins; and at a glance he could tell what was in them. A connoisseur of souls was he. Among all the pearls that had passed through his hands—some goodly

ones among them—none had seemed so rare and pure as this; it was a pearl of great price, for which a man might be prepared to part with all he possessed, if only to obtain it. There was an indefinable majesty, a moral glory, a tender grace, an ineffable attractiveness in this Man, which was immediately appreciated by the greatest of woman-born, because of his own intrinsic nobility and greatness of soul. It needed a Baptist to recognize the Christ. He who had never quailed before monarch or people, directly he came in contact with Christ, cast the crown of his manhood at his feet, and shrank away. The eagle that had soared unhindered in mid-heaven seemed transfixed by a sudden dart, and fell suddenly, with a strange, low cry, at the feet of its Creator. "I have need to be baptized of Thee, and comest Thou to me?"

II. The Significance of Christ's Baptism.—"Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness"—with such words our Lord overruled the objections of his loyal and faithful Forerunner. This is the first recorded utterance of Christ, after a silence of more than twenty years; the first also of his public ministry: it demands our passing notice. He does not say, "I have need to be baptized of thee"; nor does He say "Thou hast no need to be baptized of Me." He does not stay to explain why the greater should be baptized by the less: or why a rite which confessed sin was required for one which was absolutely

sinless. It is enough to appeal to the Baptist as his associate in a joint necessary act, becoming to them both as part of the Divine procedure, and therefore claiming their common obedience. "It becometh us (you and me) to fulfil all righteousness."

In his baptism, our Lord acknowledged the divine authority of the Forerunner. As the last and greatest of the prophets, who was to close the Old Testament era, for "the law and the prophets prophesied until John"; as the representative of Elijah the prophet, before the great and notable day of the Lord could come; as the porter of the Jewish fold—John occupied a unique position, and it was out of deference to his appointment by the Father, and as an acknowledgement of his office, that Jesus sought baptism at his hands.

John's baptism, moreover, was the inauguration of the Kingdom of Heaven. In it the material made way for the spiritual. The old system, which gave special privileges to the children of Abraham, was in the act of passing away, confessing that God could raise up children to Abraham from the stones at the water's edge, and demanding that those who would enter the Kingdom must be born from above, of water and of the Spirit. It was the outward and visible sign that Judaism was unavailing for the deepest needs of the spirit of man, and that a new and more spiritual system was about to take its place; and Christ said, in effect, "I, too, though King, obey the law of the King-

dom, and bow my head, that, by the same sign as the smallest of my subjects I may pass forward to my throne."

There was probably a deeper reason still. That Jordan water, flowing downwards to the Dead Sea, was symbolical. In the purity of its origin, amid the snows of Hermon, and in the beauty of its earlier course, it was an emblem of man's original constitution, when the Creator made him in His own image and pronounced him very good; but in these sullied and troubled waters hurrying on to the Sea of Death —waters in which thousands of sinners had confessed their sins, with tears and sighs—how apt an emblem was there of the history of our race, contaminated by the evil that is in the world through lust, and meriting the wages of sin—death! With that race, in its sin and degradation, our Lord now formally identified Himself. His baptism was his formal identification with our fallen and sinful race, though He knew no sin for Himself, and could challenge the minutest inspection of his enemies: "Which of you convinceth Me of sin?"

Was He baptized because He needed to repent, or to confess his sins? Nay, verily! He was as pure as the bosom of God, from which He came; as pure as the fire that shone above them in the orb of day; as pure as the snows on Mount Hermon, rearing itself like a vision of clouds on the horizon: but He needed to be made sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. When the paschal lamb had been chosen

by the head of a Jewish household, it was customary to take it, three days before it would be offered, to the priest, to have it sealed with the Temple seal; so our Lord, three years before his death, must be set apart and sealed by the direct act of the Holy Spirit, through the mediation of John the Baptist. "Him hath God the Father sealed."

"It becometh us"—I like that word, *becometh.* If the Divine Lord thought so much about what was becoming, surely we may. It should not be a question with us, merely, as to what may be forbidden or harmful, what may or may not be practised and permitted by our fellow-Christians, or even whether there are distinct prohibitions in the Bible that bar the way—but if a certain course is becoming. "Need I pass through that rite?" *It is becoming.* "Need I perform that lowly act?" *It is becoming.* "Need I renounce my liberty of action in that respect?" *It would be very becoming.* And whenever some hesitant soul, timid and nervous to the last degree, dares to step out, and do what it believes to be the right thing because it is becoming, Jesus comes to it, enlinks his arm, and says, "Thou art not alone in this. Thou and I stand together here. It becomes *us* to fill up to its full measure all righteousness." Ah, soul, thou shalt never step forth on a difficult and untrodden path without hearing his footfall behind thee, and becoming aware that in every act of righteousness Christ identifies Himself, saying, "It becometh *us* to fulfil all righteousness."

"Then he suffered Him." Some things we have to *do* for Christ, and some to *bear* for Him. Active virtues are great; but the passive ones are rarer and cost more, especially for strong natures like the Baptist's. But, in all our human life, there is nothing more attractive than when a strong man yields to another, accepts a deeper interpretation of duty than he had perceived, and is prepared to set aside his strong convictions of propriety before the tender pleadings of a still, soft voice. Yield to Christ, dear heart. Suffer Him to have his way. Take his yoke, and be meek and lowly of heart—so shalt thou find rest.

III. The Designation of the Messiah.—It is not to be supposed that the designation of Jesus as the Christ was given to any but John. It was apparently a private sign given to him, as the Forerunner and Herald, through which he might be authoritatively informed as to the identity of the Messiah. To say nothing of the impossibility of ordinary and unanointed eyes beholding the descent of the Holy Spirit, John's own statements seem to point clearly in this direction. He says, "I knew Him not" (*i. e.*, as Messiah), "but He that sent me to baptize with water, He said unto me, 'Upon whomsoever thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and abiding upon Him, the same is He that baptizeth with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God" (John i. 32-34). The same thought appears from putting a

perfectly legitimate construction on the words of the first evangelist: "Lo, the heavens were opened unto him" (*i. e.*, the Baptist), "and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon him" (Matt. iii. 16).

What a theophany was here! As the Man of Nazareth emerged from the water, the sign for which John had been eagerly waiting and looking was granted. He had believed he would see it, but had never thought to see it granted to one so near akin to himself. We never expect the great God to come to *us!* And the exclamation, *lo,* indicates his startled surprise. He saw far away into the blue vault, which had opened into depth after depth of golden glory. The vail was rent to admit of the coming forth of the Divine Spirit, who seemed to descend in visible shape—as a dove might, with gentle, fluttering motion—and to alight on the head of the Holy One, who stood there fresh from his baptism. The stress of the narrator, as he told the story afterwards, was that the Spirit not only came, but *abode.* Here was the miracle of miracles, that He should be willing to *abide* in any human temple, who for so many ages had wandered restlessly over the deluge of human sin, seeking a resting-place, but finding none. Here, at least, was an ark into which this second Noah might pull in the fluttering dove, unable to feed, like the raven, on corruption and death.

The voice of God from heaven proclaimed that Jesus

of Nazareth was his beloved Son, in whom He was well pleased; and the Baptist could have no further doubt that the Desire of all Nations, the Lord whom his people sought, the Messenger of the Covenant, had suddenly come to his temple to act as a refiner's fire and as fullers' soap. "John bare witness, saying, I have beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven; and it abode upon Him." "John beareth witness of Him and crieth" (John i. 15, 32).

How much that designation meant to Christ! It was his Pentecost, his consecration and dedication to his life-work; from thenceforth, in a new and special sense, the Spirit of the Lord was upon Him, and He was anointed to preach. But it was still more to the Baptist. He knew that his mission was nearly fulfilled, that his office was ended. He had opened the gate to the true Shepherd, and must now soon consign to Him all charge of the flock. Jesus must increase, while he decreased. He that was from heaven was above all; as for himself, he was of the earth, and spake of the earth. The Sun had risen, and the day-star began to wane.

VIII

Not that Light, but a Witness.

(John i. 8.)

"Nothing resting in its own completeness
Can have worth or beauty; but alone
Because it leads and tends to farther sweetness,
Fuller, higher, deeper than its own.

"Spring's real glory dwells not in the meaning,
Gracious though it be, of her blue hours;
But is hidden in her tender leaning
To the summer's richer wealth of flowers."

A. A. Proctor.

THE baptism and revelation of Christ had a marvellous effect on the ministry of the Forerunner. Previous to that memorable day, the burden of his teaching had been in the direction of repentance and confession of sin. But afterwards, the whole force of his testimony was towards the person and glory of the Shepherd of Israel. He understood that for the remainder of his brief ministry, which perhaps did not greatly exceed six months, he must bend all his strength to announcing to the people the prerogatives and claims of Him who stood amongst them, though they knew Him not. "There came a man, sent

from God, whose name was John. The same came for witness, that he might bear witness of the Light, that all might believe through him. He was not the Light, but came that he might bear witness of the Light."

Our subject, therefore, naturally divides itself into two divisions: John's admissions about himself, and his testimony to the Lord. And it is interesting to notice that they were given on three successive days, as appears from the twofold use of the phrase, "On the morrow." "On the morrow" (*i. e.*, after he had met and answered the deputation from the Sanhedrim), he seeth Jesus coming unto him . . . " (i. 29). "Again, on the morrow John was standing, and two of his disciples . . . " (35).

These events took place at Bethany, or Bethabara, on the eastern bank of the Jordan. The river there is one hundred feet in width, and, except in flood, some five to seven feet deep. It lies in a tropical valley, the verdure of which is in striking contrast to the desolation which reigns around.

I. The Baptist's Admissions about Himself.—When the fourth evangelist uses the word *Jews*, he invariably means the Sanhedrim. John had become so famous, and his influence so commanding, that he could not be ignored by the religious leaders of the time. In their hearts they derided him, and desired to do with him "whatsoever they listed." His preach-

ing of repentance, and his unmeasured denunciation of themselves as a brood of vipers, were not to be borne. But they forbore to meet him in the open field, and resolved to send a deputation, which might extract some admission from his lips that would furnish them with ground for subsequent action. "The Jews sent unto him from Jerusalem priests and Levites to ask him, 'Who art thou?' . . . 'Why baptizest thou?'" The first question was universally interesting; the second specially so to the Pharisee party, who were the high ritualists of their day, and who were reluctant that a new rite, which they had not sanctioned, should be added to the Jewish ecclesiastical system.

It is a striking scene. The rushing river, the tropical gorge, the dense crowds of people standing thick together, the Baptist in his sinewy strength and uncouth attire, surrounded by the little group of disciples, whilst through the throng a deputation of grey-beards, the representatives of a decadent religion, makes its difficult way—these are the principal features of a memorable incident.

There was a profound silence, and men craned their necks and strained their ears to see and hear everything, as the deputation challenged the prophet with the inquiry, "Who art thou?" There was a great silence. Men were prepared to believe anything of the eloquent young preacher. "The people were in expectation, and all men reasoned in their hearts concerning John, whether haply he were the Christ"

(Luke iii. 15). If he had given the least encouragement to their dreams and hopes, they would have unfurled again the tattered banner of the Maccabees; and beneath his leadership would have swept, like a wild hurricane, against the Roman occupation, gaining, perhaps, a momentary success, which afterwards would have been wiped out in blood. "And he confessed, and denied not; and he confessed, I am not the Christ."

If a murmur of voices burst out in anger, disappointment, and chagrin, as this answer spread from lip to lip, it was immediately hushed by the second inquiry propounded, "What then? Art thou Elijah?" (alluding to the prediction of Malachi iv. 5). If they had worded their question rather differently, and put it thus, "Hast thou come in the power of Elias?" John must have acknowledged that it was so; but if they meant to inquire if he was literally Elijah returned again to this world, he had no alternative but to say, decisively and laconically, "I am not."

There was a third arrow in their quiver, since the other two had missed the mark: and amid the deepening atttention of the listening multitudes, and in allusion to Moses' prediction that God would raise up a prophet like to himself (Deut. xviii. 15; Acts iii. 22; vii. 37), they said, "Art thou the Prophet?" and he answered, "No."

The deputation was nonplussed. They had exhausted their repertory of questions. Their mission

threatened to become abortive, unless they could extract some positive admission. They must put a leading question; and their spokesman, for the fourth time, challenged the strange being, whom they found it so hard to label and place on any shelf of their ecclesiastical museum. "They said therefore unto him, 'Who art thou, that we may give an answer to them that sent us? What sayest thou of thyself?'" "He said, 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said Isaiah the prophet.'"

How infinitely noble! How characteristic of strength! A weak man would have launched himself on the flowing tide of enthusiasm, and allowed himself to be swept away by its impetuous rush. What a mingling of strength and humility! When men suggested that he was the Christ, he insisted that he was only a voice—the voice of the herald, whom men hardly notice, because they strain their eyes in the direction from which he has come, to behold the King Himself. When they complimented him on his teaching, he told them that He who would winnow the wheat from the chaff was yet to appear. And when they crowded to his baptism, he reiterated that it was only the baptism of negation, *of water,* but the Christ would baptize with the Holy Ghost as with fire.

Why was this? Ah, he knew his limitations! He was the greatest-born of woman, yet he knew that his bosom was not broad enough, nor his heart tender

enough, to justify him in bidding all weary and heavy-laden ones to come to him for rest; he could not say that he and God were one, and include himself with the Deity, in the majestic pronoun, *we;* he never dared to ask men to believe in himself as they believed in the Father: but there came after him One who dared to say all these things; and this is the inevitable conclusion, that either Jesus was inferior to John in all that goes to make a strong and noble character, or that Jesus was all that John said He was, "The Son of God, and King of Israel." There is no third suggestion possible. We must either estimate Jesus as immeasurably inferior, or incomparably superior, to the strong, sane, Spirit-filled prophet, who never wearied in declaring the impassable chasm that yawned between them.

Such humility always accompanies a true vision of Christ. If we view it from the low ground, the mountain may appear to reach into the sky; but when we reach the mountain-top, we are immediately aware of the infinite distance between the highest snow-peak and the nearest star. To the crowds John may have seemed to fulfil all the essential conditions of the prophetic portraiture of the Messiah; but *he* stood on the mountain, and knew how infinitely the Christ stood above him. This is apparent in his reply to the final inquiry of the Sanhedrim, "And they asked him, and said unto him, 'Why, then, baptizest thou, if thou art not the Christ, neither Elijah, neither the prophet?'" And John said

in effect, "I baptize because I was sent to baptize, and I know very well that my work in this respect is temporary and transient; but what matters that? In the midst of you standeth One whom ye know not, even He that cometh after me, the latchet of whose shoe I am not worthy to unloose. The Christ is come. Have not I seen Him, standing amid your crowds, yea, descending these very banks?"

The people must have turned one to another, as he spoke. What! Had the Messiah come! It could hardly be. There had been no prodigies in earth or sky worthy of his advent. How could He be amongst them, and they unaware! But it was even so, and it is so still. The Christ is in us, and with us still. There may be no transcendent symptoms of his blessed presence, as He stands in the little groups of two and three gathered in his name; but the eye of faith detects Him. Where others see only the bare cliffs of Patmos, or the mines with their gangs of convicts, the anointed gaze beholds a face brighter than the sun; the purged ear catches the accents of a voice like the murmur of waters on the still night air. Remember how He said, "He that loveth Me shall be loved of my Father; and I will love him, and will manifest Myself to him." As the Holy Spirit revealed Him to John, so He will reveal Him to us, if only, like John, we will be content with nothing less, and wait expectant with the heart on the outlook for the manifestation of the Son of God; for so He promised, saying, "He shall take of

mine, and shall declare it unto you." And when the child of faith speaks thus, with the accent of conviction, of what he has seen, and tasted, and handled of the Word of life, it is not strange that the children of this world, whose eyes are blinded, begin to question and deride. What is there to be seen that they cannot see? What heard that they cannot detect? Ah, "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." "There standeth One among you," said the Baptist, "whom ye know not."

II. The Baptist's Witness to the Lord.—Six weeks passed by from that memorable vision of the opened heaven and the descending Spirit, and John had eagerly scanned every comer to the river-bank to see again that divinely beautiful face. But in vain: for Jesus was in the wilderness, being tempted of the devil, for forty days and nights, the companion of wild beasts, and exposed to a very hurricane of temptation.

At the end of the six weeks, the interview with the deputation from the Sanhedrim took place, which we have already described; and on the day after, when his confession of inferiority was still fresh in the minds of his hearers, when some were criticizing and others pitying, when symptoms that the autumn of his influence had set in were in the air, his eye flashed, his face lit up, and he cried, saying: "This is He of whom I

said, 'After me cometh a man who is become before me, for He was before me.' Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world."

Did all eyes turn towards the Christ? Was there a ripple of interest and expectancy through the crowd? Did any realise the unearthly beauty and spiritual beauty of his presence? We know not. Scripture is silent, only telling us that on the following day, when, with two disciples, he looked on Jesus as He walked, and repeated his affirmation, "Behold the Lamb of God," those two disciples followed Him, never to return to their old master—who knew it must be so, and was content to decrease if only *He* might increase.

"For, ah! the Master is so fair,
So sweet his smile on banished men,
That they who once his face have seen
Can never rest on earth again.
And they who see Him risen afar,
At God's right hand to welcome them,
Forgetful stand of Home and Land,
Desiring fair Jerusalem."

Let us notice the successive revelations which were made to John, and through him to Israel, who, you remember, held him, as they had every warrant for doing, to be in the deepest sense a prophet of the Lord. This conviction has been definitely endorsed by succeeding ages, which have classed him as one of the six greatest men that ever left their mark on the world.

(1) *He rightly conceived of Christ's pre-existence.* "He was before me" (John i. 30). The phrase re-

sembles Christ's own words, when He said: "Before Abraham was, I am." In John's case it developed soon after into another and kindred expression: "He that cometh from above, is above all" (John iii. 31). With such words the Baptist taught his disciples. He insisted that Jesus of Nazareth had an existence anterior to Nazareth, and previous to his birth of the village maiden. He recognised that his goings had been of old, even from everlasting, that He was the mighty God, the Father of the Ages, and the Prince of Peace. As for himself, he was of the earth, and of the earth he spoke; as for this One, He came from above, and was above all. It is not surprising, therefore, that one of his disciples, catching his Master's spirit, wrote: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him."

(2) *He rightly apprehended the sacrificial aspect of Christ's work.* "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." Was it that his priestly lineage gave Him a special right to coin and use this appellation? It was, without doubt, breathed into his heart by the Holy Spirit; but his whole previous training, as the son of a priest, fitted him to receive and transmit it. An attempt has been made to limit the meaning of these words to the personal character of Jesus, his purity, and gentleness; but, to the Jews who listened, the latter part of his exclamation

could have but one significance. They would at once connect with his words, those of the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms. "The goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a solitary land." "He bare the sin of many." "He is led as a lamb to the slaughter."

From the slopes of Mount Moriah, a young voice has expressed the longing of the ages, "Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb?" This has been the cry of the human heart in all generations. From the days of Abel men have brought the firstlings of their flocks, laying them on the altar, and consuming them with fire; but there was always a sense of failure and insufficiency. Through the ages, and in every clime, priest after priest offered the lamb upon the altar, but by the very fact of continual repetition, bore witness to the insufficiency of its propitiation. "Every priest, indeed," is the comment of inspiration, "standeth day by day ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, the which can never take away sins." Must not the hearts of hundreds of saintly priests have been filled with the same inquiry, where is the lamb? As the prophets understood more clearly the nature of God's dealing with man—as, for instance, Micah saw that even the offering of the first-born could never atone for the sins of the soul—may we not suppose that from their lips also the same inquiry was solicited, Where is the lamb? Nature cannot answer that cry. She is fascinating, especially when she dimples with the smile of spring, and unveils her face in summer to re-

ceive the caresses of the sun. But with all her beauty and fascination she cannot answer the entreaty of the conscience that the penalty of sin may be removed, its power broken, so that man may walk with God with a fearless heart. Animals at the best are only symbols of the complete solution to the ever-recurring problem of human sin: thus from all the ages goes forth the cry, Where is the lamb? Then from his heaven God sends forth his Son to be the sufficient answer to the universal appeal: and the heaven-sent messenger, from his rocky pulpit, as he sees Jesus coming to him, cries, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world."

Dear soul, thou mayest venture on Him. He is God's Lamb; on Him the sin of our race has been laid, and He stood before God with the accumulated load—"made sin"; the iniquity of us all was laid upon Him; wounded for our transgressions; bruised for our iniquities; chastised for our peace; stricken for our transgression; bearing the sin of many. As the first Adam brought sin on the race, the second Adam has put it away by the sacrifice of Himself. Men are lost now, not because of Adam's sin, nor because they were born into a race of sinners, but for the sin which they presumptuously and wilfully commit, or because by unbelief they contract themselves out of the benefits of Christ's death. The servant who had been forgiven by his king, but took his brother by the throat, brought back upon himself the full penalty from which the

royal warrant had freed him; and if any one of us cling to sin, rejecting and trampling under foot the Saviour's works on our behalf, we cancel so far all those benefits of our Saviour's passion which otherwise would accrue, and bring back upon ourselves the penalties from which He would fain have delivered us.

(3) *He understood the baptism of the Holy Spirit.* "The same as He that baptizeth with the Holy Spirit." As Son of God, our Saviour from all eternity was one with the Holy Spirit in the mystery of the blessed Trinity; but as "the one Man," He received in his human nature the fulness of the Divine Spirit. It pleased the Father that in Him should all the fulness of the Godhead dwell, that He might be able to communicate Him to all the sons of men who were united to Him by a living faith. Thus it fell that He was able to assure his disciples that if they waited in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father, as John baptized with water, they should be baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts i. 4, 5).

The term *baptism*, as applied to the Holy Spirit, had better be confined to those marvellous manifestations of spiritual power which are recorded in Acts ii., viii., x., xix.; whilst the word *filling* should be used of those experiences of the indwelling and anointing of the Divine Spirit which are within the reach of us all. Still, we may all adopt the words of the Baptist, and tell our living Head that we have need to be baptized of Him —need to be plunged into the fiery baptism; need to be

searched by the stinging flame; need to be cleansed from dross and impurity; need to be caught in the transfiguring, heaven-leaping energy of the Holy Spirit, borne upon his bosom into the rare atmosphere where the seven lamps burn always before the throne of God. The blood of the lamb and the fire of the Holy Spirit are thus inextricably united.

(4) *He beheld the mystery of the Holy Trinity.* For the first time this was made manifest to man. On the one hand there was the Father speaking from heaven; on the other the Spirit descending as a dove— and between them was the Son of Man who was proclaimed to be the Son of God, the beloved Son. Surely John might say that flesh and blood had not revealed these things, but they had been made known to him by a divine revelation.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is a profound mystery, hidden from the intellect, but revealed to the humble and reverent heart; hidden from the wise and prudent, and revealed to babes. Welcome Jesûs Christ as John did; and, as to John, so the whole wonder of the Godhead will be made known to thy heart. Thou wilt hear the Father bearing witness to his Son: thou wilt see how clearly the Son reveals the Father, and achieves redemption; thou shalt know what it is to stand beneath the open heaven and behold and participate in the Divine anointing. Of what good is it to reason about the Trinity if thou hast no spiritual appetite for the gifts of the Trinity? But if this is thine,

and thou openest thine heart, thou wilt receive the gift and understand the doctrine.

(5) *He appreciated the Divine Sonship of Christ.* "I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God." This witness counts for much. John knew men, knew himself, knew Christ. He would not have said so much unless he had been profoundly convinced; and he would not have been profoundly convinced unless irrefragible evidence had been presented to him. What though, when on the following day he repeats his exclamation, his whole congregation leaves him to follow the Man of Nazareth to his home? The heart of the Forerunner is satisfied, for he has heard the Bridegroom's voice. The Son of God has come, and has given him an understanding that he might know Him that is true.

IX

"He Must Increase, but I Must Decrease."

(John iii. 30.)

"Where is the lore the Baptist taught,
The soul unswerving and the fearless tongue?
The much-enduring wisdom, sought
By lonely prayer, the haunted rocks among?
Who counts it gain
His light would wane.
So the whole world to Jesus throng?"

FROM the Jordan Valley our Lord returned to Galilee and Nazareth. The marriage feast of Cana, his return to Jerusalem, the cleansing of the Temple, and the interview with Nicodemus, followed in rapid succession. And when the crowds of Passover pilgrims were dispersing homewards, He also left the city with his disciples, and began a missionary tour throughout the land of Judæa.

This tour is not much dwelt upon in Scripture. We only catch a glimpse of it here in the 22nd verse, and again in the address of the apostle Peter to Cornelius, where he speaks of Christ preaching good tidings of peace throughout all Judæa (Acts x. 36, 37). How long it lasted we cannot tell; but it must have occupied

some months, for He tarried from time to time at different points.

It is not likely that our Lord unfolded his Messianic character, or taught with the same clearness as in after days. For the most part, He would adopt the cry of the Baptist. Of the commencement of his ministry it is recorded: "Jesus came, . . . preaching the Gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe in the Gospel'" (Mark i. 14, 15). But his deeds declared his royalty.

Wherever He went He was welcomed with vast enthusiasm; so much so that it could be said without much exaggeration, "All men come to Him" (ver. 26). The scenes which had occurred a few months before to inaugurate the Baptist's ministry were re-enacted. The progress of the heaven-sent Teacher (ver. 2) was accompanied by immense throngs of people, who, wearied with the tiresome exactions of Pharisee and scribe, turned with eagerness to the humanness and holiness of the True Shepherd. It is said that cattle, sick and harried with the voyage across the Atlantic, will show signs of revival as they sniff the first land breezes laden with the breath of the clover fields.

During all this time the Baptist was continuing his preparatory work in the Jordan Valley, though now driven by persecution to leave the western bank for Ænon and Salim on the eastern side, where a handful

of followers still clung to him. "John was not yet cast into prison," but the shadow of his impending fate was already gathering over him; and so he was baptizing in Ænon, near to Salim, where the Jordan sweeps out into broad sheets of water, eminently suitable for his purposes. Thither they came and were baptized. The morning star lingers in the same heavens with the sun, whom it has announced; but its lustre has paled, and its glories are shorn.

It would appear from the R. V. (ver. 25) that a Jew, probably an emissary of the Sanhedrim, brought tidings to that little circle of true-hearted disciples of the work that Jesus was doing in Judæa, and drew them into a discussion as to the comparative value of the two baptisms. It was acknowledged that Jesus did not, with his own hands, perform the rite of baptism, probably for reasons afterwards cited by his great apostle (iv. 1; compare 1 Cor. i. 14-17); but it would be administered by his disciples, at his direction, and with his countenance; and therefore it could be reported to the Baptist by his disciples, who came to him with eyes flashing with indignation, and faces heated with the excitement of the discussion: "Rabbi, He that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou hast borne witness, the same baptizeth, and all men come unto Him."

It was as though they said, "Master, is it not too bad? See how thy generous testimony has been requited! In the day of thy glory thou wert too profuse

in thy acknowledgments, too prodigal in thy testimonials. Now this new Teacher has taken a leaf out of thy programme; He too is preaching, baptizing, and gathering a school of disciples." But there was no tinder in that noble breast which these sparks of hell could kindle. Nothing but love dwelt there. He had been plunged into the baptism of a holy love, which had burnt out the selfishness and jealousy, which were as natural to him as to us all. It was as when a spark falls into an ocean and is instantly extinguished. Thus his reply will ever rank among the greatest utterances of mortal man. The Lord said that John was the greatest of those born of woman; and, if by nothing else, by these words his moral stature and superlative excellence were vindicated. He seemed great when his voice rang like a clarion through Palestine, attracting and thrilling the mighty throngs; great, when he dared to tell Herod that it was unlawful for him to have his brother's wife, uttering words which those palace walls must have been startled to hear; great, when he baptized Him for whom the world was waiting, and who was declared to be the Son of God with power: but he never seemed so great as when he refused to enter into those acrimonious altercations and discussions, and said simply, "A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven."

I. John counted Influence and Position as Divine Gifts.—What startling differences obtain among

men—Peter and John, Calvin and Melanchthon, John Knox and Samuel Rutherford, Kingsley and Keble! Each of these has left his imprint on human history; each so needful to do his own special work, but each so diverse from all others. We are sometimes tempted to attribute their special powers and success to their circumstances, their times, their parents and teachers; but there is a deeper and more satisfactory explanation. Adopting the words of the Forerunner, we may say—They had nothing that they had not received from heaven, by the direct appointment and decree of God.

It was thus that the Baptist reasoned: "Whatever success and blessing I had was due to the appointment of Him who sent me to preach his Gospel and announce the advent of his Son. Every man has his work and sphere appointed him of God. If this new Teacher meet with such success, we have no right to be jealous of Him, lest we sin against God, who has made Him what He is. And if we have not the same crowds as once, let us be content to take this, too, as the appointment of Heaven, glad to do whatever is assigned to us, and to leave all results with God."

This is a golden sentence, indeed!—"A man can receive nothing except it be given him from heaven." Hast thou great success in thy life-work? Do crowds gather around thy steps and throng thy audience-chamber? Do not attribute them to thyself. They are all the gifts of God's grace. He raiseth up one and setteth down another. Thou hast nothing that thou

hast not received; and if thou hast received it, see to it that thou exercisest perpetually the faculty of receptiveness, so that thou mayest receive more and more, grace on grace. The river in its flow should hollow out the channel-bed through which it flows. Be thankful, but never vain. He who gave may take. Great talents bestowed imply great responsibility in the day of reckoning. Be not high-minded, but fear. Much success can only be enjoyed without injury to the inner life by being considered as the dear gift of Christ, to be used for Him.

Hast thou but one talent, and little success?—yet this is as God willed it. He might have given more had He willed it so; be thankful that He has given any. Use what thou hast. The five barley loaves and two small fishes will so increase, as they are distributed, that they will supply the want of thousands. Do not dare to envy one more successful and used than thyself, lest thou be convicted of murmuring against the appointment of thy Lord.

Here, too, is the cure of jealousy, which more than anything else blights the soul of the servant of God. To an older minister, who has passed the zenith of his popularity and power, it is often a severe trial to see younger men stepping into positions which he once held and has been compelled to renounce. He is mightily tempted to disparage their power, and condemn them by faint praise; or, if he praise, to add one biting comment which undoes the generosity and frankness

of the eulogium. Why should this younger man, who was not born when his own ministry was at full tide, now carry all before him, whilst the waves are quietly withdrawing from the margin of seaweed they once cast up! Thoughts like these corrode and canker the soul; and there is no arrest to them, unless by a definite effort of the Spirit-energized will, the soul turns to God with the words: "A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven. I had my glad hours of meridian glory, and have still the mellow light of a summer sunset. It was God's gift to me, as rest is now; and I will rejoice that He raises up others to do his work. I will rejoice that the Kingdom is coming, that Christ is satisfied, that men are being saved; this shall be my joy, and it shall be fulfilled."

How much misery, heart-burning, and disappointment would be saved if, at the beginning of life, each of us inquired seriously what that special work in the world might be to which he was called, and for which he is fitted. Then, instead of being poor imitations, we might be good originals. Instead of spending our time in going off on side issues, we might bend all our strength to the main purpose of our existence. God has meant each of us for something; incarnating in us one of his own great thoughts, and equipping us with all material that is necessary for its realization. We may probably discover its meaning by the peculiarities of our mental endowments or the advice of friends; by the necessity of our circumstances or the

prompting of the Holy Spirit. Otherwise we must be content to go on making each day according to the pattern shown us—not as a whole, but in detail—sure that some day each bit and scrap, each vail and hanging, will find its place, and the tabernacle of our life stand complete.

Every name is historic in God's estimate. The obscurest among us has his place in the Divine plan, his lesson to learn, his work to do. The century opening before us can no more dispense with us than an orchestra with the piccolo. A pawn on God's chessboard may take a knight, or give check to a king. "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works which God has before prepared (R. V.), that we should walk in them."

II. JOHN CAUGHT SIGHT OF A FULLER AND RICHER IDEAL THAN HIS OWN.—Tidings had, without doubt, been brought to him of our Lord's first miracle in Cana of Galilee. We know that it had made a great impression on the little group of ardent souls, which had been called to share the village festivities with their newly-found Master; and we know that some of them were still deeply attached to their old friend and leader. From these he would learn the full details of that remarkable inauguration of this long-expected ministry. How startled he must have been at the first hearing! He had announced the Husbandman with his fan to thoroughly winnow his floor; the Baptist with his fire;

the Lamb of God, holy, harmless, and separate from sinners: but the Messiah opens his ministry among men by mingling with the simple villagers in their wedding joy, and actually ministers to their innocent mirth, as He turns the water into wine! The Son of Man has come "eating and drinking"! What a contrast was here to the austerity of the desert, the coarse raiment, the hard fare! "John the Baptist came, neither eating nor drinking." Could this be He? And yet there was no doubt that the heaven had been opened above Him, that the Dove had descended, and that God's Voice had declared Him to be the "Beloved Son." But what a contrast to all that he had looked for!

Further reflection, however, on that incident, in which Jesus manifested forth his glory, and the cleansing of the Temple, which immediately followed, must have convinced the Baptist that this conception of holiness was the true one. His own type could never be universal or popular. It was not to be expected that the mass of men could be spared from the ordinary demands of daily life to spend their days in the wilderness as he had done; and it would not have been for their well-being, or that of the world, if his practice had become the rule. It would have been a practical admission that ordinary life was common and unclean; and that there was no possibility of infusing it with the high principles of the kingdom of heaven. Consecration to God would have become synonymous with

the exclusion of wife and child, of home and business, of music and poetry, from the soul of the saint; whereas its true conception demands that nothing which God has created can be accounted common or unclean, but all may be included within the encircling precincts of the Redeemer's kingdom. The motto of Christian consecration is, therefore, given in that remarkable assertion of the apostle: "Every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it be received with thanksgiving: for it is sanctified through the Word of God and prayer" (1 Tim. iv. 4, 5).

John saw, beneath the illuminating ray of the Holy Spirit, that this was the Divine Ideal; that the Redeemer could not contradict the Creator; that the Kingdom was consistent with the home; and the presence of the King with the caress of woman and the laughter of the child, and the innocent mirth of the village feast. This he saw, and cried in effect: "That village scene is the key to the Messiah's ministry to Israel. He is not only Guest at a bridegroom's table, but the Bridegroom Himself. He has come to woo and win the chosen race. Of old they were called Hepzibah and Beulah; and now those ancient words come back to mind with newly-minted meaning, with the scent of spring. Our land, long bereaved and desolate, is to be married. Joy, joy to her! The Bridegroom is here. He that hath the bride is the Bridegroom. As for me, I am the Bridegroom's friend, sent to negotiate the match, privileged to know and bring

together the two parties in the blessed nuptials—blessed with the unspeakable gladness of hearing the Bridegroom's manly speech. Do you tell me that He is preaching, and that all come to Him? That is what I have wanted most of all. This my joy, therefore, is fulfilled. 'He must increase, and I must decrease.'"

III. JOHN HAD ENLARGED PERCEPTION OF THE TRUE NATURE OF CHRIST.—It has been questioned whether the paragraph which follows (vers. 31-36) was spoken by the Baptist, or is the comment of the Evangelist. With many eminent commentators, I incline strongly to the former view. The phraseology employed in this paragraph is closely similar to the words addressed by Christ to Nicodemus, and often used by Himself, as in John v.; and they may well have filtered through to the Baptist, by the lips of Andrew, Peter, and John, who would often retail to their venerated earliest teacher what they heard from Jesus.

Consider, then, the Baptist's creed at this point of his career. He *believed* in the heavenly origin and divinity of the Son of Man—that He was from heaven and above all. He *believed* in the unique and divine source of his teaching—that He did not communicate what He had learnt at second-hand, but stood forth as one speaking what He knows, and testifying what He has seen—"For He whom God has sent, speaketh the words of God." He *believed* in his copious enduement with the Holy Spirit. Knowing that human teachers,

at the best, could only receive the Spirit in a limited degree, he recognized that when God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit there was no limit, no measuring metre, no stint. It was copious, rich, unmeasured—so much so that it ran down from his head, as Hermon's dews descend to the lonely heights of Zion. He *believed* in his near relationship to God, using the well-known Jewish phrase of sonship to describe his possession of the Divine nature in a unique sense, and recalling the utterance of the hour of baptism, to give weight to his assurance that the Father loved Him as Son. Lastly He *believed* in the mediatorial function of the Man of Nazareth—that the Father had already given all things into his hand; and that the day was coming when He would sit on the Throne of David, yea, on the mediatorial throne itself, King of kings, and Lord of lords, the keys of Death and Hades, of the realms of invisible existence and spiritual power, hanging at his girdle.

To that creed the Baptist added a testimony, which has been the means of light and blessing to myriads. Being dead, he yet has spoken through the ages, assuring us that to believe on Jesus is to have, as a present fact, eternal life, the life which fills the Being of God and defies time and change. Faith is the act by which we open our heart to receive the gift of God; as earth unbares her breast to sun and rain, and as the good wife flings wide her doors and windows to let in the spring sunshine and the summer air. Ah, reader, I

would that thou hadst this faith! The open heart towards Christ! The yielded will! Thou needst only will to have Him, and He has already entered, though thou canst not detect his footfall, or the chime of the bells around his garment's hem. And to shut thy heart against Him not only excludes the life which might be thine, but incurs the wrath of God (ver. 36).

There are two concluding thoughts! First: The only hope of a decreasing self is an increasing Christ. There is too much of the self-life in us all; chafing against God's will, refusing God's gifts, instigating the very services we render to God, simulating humility and meekness for the praise of men. But how can we be rid of this accursed self-consciousness and pride? Ah! we must turn our back on our shadow, and our face towards Christ. We must look at all things from his standpoint, trying to realize always how they affect Him, and then entering into his emotions. It has been said that "the woman who loves thinks with the brain of the man she loves"; and surely if we love Christ with a constraining passion, we shall think his thoughts and feel his joys, and no longer live unto ourselves, but unto Him.

> "Love took up the Harp of Life
> And smote on all its chords with might;
> Smote the chord of self, that trembling,
> Passed in music out of sight."

Second: we must view our relationship to Christ as the betrothal and marriage of our soul to our Maker

and Redeemer, who is also our Husband. "Wherefore, my brethren," says the apostle, "ye also were made dead to the law through the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to Him that was raised from the dead, that we might bring forth fruit unto God."

The Son of God is not content to love us. He cannot rest till He has all our love in return. "He looketh in at the windows" of the soul, "and showeth Himself through the lattice." Our Beloved speaks, and says unto us, "Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away." And, as our response, He waits to hear us say:

> "My Beloved is mine, and I am his;
> He feedeth his flock among the lilies,
> Until the day break, and the shadows flee away,
> Turn, my Beloved!"

X

The King's Courts.

(Mark vi.)

"The number of thine own complete,
Sum up and make an end;
Sift clean the chaff, and house the wheat;
And then, O Lord, descend.

"Descend, and solve by that descent
This mystery of life;
Where good and ill, together blent,
Wage an undying strife."—J. H. N.

OUR story brings us next to speak of the Baptist's relations with Herod Antipas, son of the great Herod, a contemptible princeling who inherited a fourth part of his father's dominions (hence known as the Tetrarch), ruling over Galilee and part of Perea. For the most part he lived at Tiberias, in great state, which he had imported from Rome, where he had spent part of his early life. From an early age he had been entrusted with despotic power, and, as the natural and inevitable result, had become sensual, weak, capricious, and cruel.

It is of the collision between this man, whom our Lord compared to a fox, and John the Baptist that we

have now to treat. We need only notice here that every great character on the page of history has had his vehement antagonist. Moses, Pharaoh; Elijah, Ahab; Jeremiah, Jehoiakim; Paul, Nero, Savonarola, the Medici; Luther, the Emperor Charles V.; John Knox, Queen Mary.

I. The Cause of the Collision.—All the world had flocked to see and hear John the Baptist. Every mouth was full of his eccentricities and eloquence. Marvellous stories were being told of the effect which he had produced on the lives of those who had come under his influence. All this was well known to Herod. His spies were present in every great gathering, and served the purpose of the newspaper of to-day; so that he was well informed of all the topics that engaged the popular mind.

For some months, also, Herod had watched the career of the preacher. When he least expected it, he was under the surveillance of the closest criticism. A fierce light, like that which beats about a throne, fell strongly on his most secret actions. And the result had been perfectly satisfactory. Herod felt that John was a true man. He observed him, and was satisfied that he was a just man and a holy. Reasons of state forebade the King from going in person to the Jordan Valley; but he was extremely eager to see and hear this mighty man of God: and so, one day, at the close of a discourse, an argument with the Pharisees, or the ad-

ministration of the rite of baptism, John found himself accosted by one of the court chamberlains, and summoned to deliver his message before the court. Herod "sent for him."

We might wonder how it could happen that a man like Herod, who notoriously lived in a glass house, so far as character went, should be so willing to call in so merciless a preacher of repentance as John the Baptist was—before whose words, flung like stones, full many a glass house had crashed to the ground, leaving its tenant unsheltered before the storm. But it must be remembered that most men, when they enter the precincts of the court, are accustomed to put velvet in their mouths; and, however vehement they may have been in denouncing the sins of the lower classes, they change their tone when face to face with sinners in high places. Herod, therefore, had every reason to presume that John would obey this unwritten law; and, whilst denouncing sin in general, would refrain from anything savouring of the direct and personal.

Another reason probably actuated Herod. He knew that the land was filled with the fame of the Baptist, and it seemed an easy path to popularity, and likely to divert attention from his private sins, which had made much scandal, to patronize the religion of the masses. At this point he probably entertained much the same feeling toward the desert-prophet that led Simon the Pharisee to invite Jesus to eat with him. "Yes, let John the Baptist come. Court life is dreary and mo-

notonous enough. It will make a little diversion, like a breath of fresh air on a sultry day. It is worth risking a little roughness in his speech, and uncouthness in his manner, if only he while away an afternoon. Besides, it will please his following, which is considerable. Let him come by all means."

We are reminded of a similar scene in Old Testament history, when, at the solicitation of Jehoshaphat, Ahab sent for Micaiah, "The messenger that went to call Micaiah spake unto him, saying, 'Behold, the words of the prophets declare good to the King with one mouth; let thy word therefore, I pray thee, be like one of theirs, and speak thou good.'"

One interpretation of Mark vi. 20 suggests that the Baptist's first sermon before Herod was followed by another, and yet another. The Baptist dealt with general subjects, urged on the King's attention some minor reforms, which were not too personal or drastic, and won his genuine regard. We are told that he used to hear (*the imperfect tense*) him gladly, and "did many things." It was a relief to Herod's mind to feel that there were many things which he could do, many wrongs which he could set right, whilst the main wrong of his life was left untouched. Ah! it is remarkable how much men will do in the direction of amendment and reform, if only, by a tacit understanding, nothing is said, or hinted at, which threatens the one sin in which the heart's evil has concentrated itself. But John knew that his duty to Herod, to truth,

to public morality, demanded that he should go further, and pierce to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, of the joints and marrow; and therefore on one memorable occasion he accosted the royal criminal with the crime of which men were speaking secretly everywhere, and uttered the memorable sentence which could not be forgiven: "It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife."

We can imagine how some room in the palace, which had often been the scene of wild riot, would be improvised as an audience chamber, filled with seats, and crowded on each occasion of the Baptist's appearance with a strange and brilliant throng. In the midst the King and the woman with whom he was living in illicit union; next them her daughter, Salome; around them courtiers and ladies, nobles and pages, soldiers and servants. On all sides splendid dresses, magnificent uniforms, rare jewels, luxurious upholstery, added light and colour to the scene.

The sermon began. As was John's wont, he arraigned the sin, the formalism, the laxity of the times; he proclaimed the advent of the kingdom, the presence of the King; he demanded, in the name of God, repentance and reform. Herod was, as usual, impressed and convinced; he assented to the preacher's propositions; already he had settled himself into his usual posture for hearing gladly. It was as when we watch summer-lightning playing around the horizon; we have no fear so long as it is not forked.

Presently, however, John becomes more personal and direct than ever before. He begins, in no measured terms, to denounce the sin of men in high places, and holds up the dissoluteness which disgraced the court. As he proceeds, a breathless silence falls on the crowd sitting or standing around him, their dresses in curious contrast to his severe garment of camel's hair; their nervous dread in as great contrast to his incisive and searching eloquence. Here were the people clothed in soft raiment, and accustomed to sumptuous fare, bending as reeds before the gusts of wind, sweeping fiercely across the marsh.

Finally, the preacher comes closer still, and pointing to the princess who sat beside Herod, looking Herod in the face he exclaims: "It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife."

We need not dwell on all the terrible details of that disgraceful sin. But every circumstance which could deepen its infamy was present. Herod's wife, the daughter of Aretas, King of Arabia, was still living; as was Philip, the husband of Herodias. The *liaison* commenced at Rome, when Herod was the guest of his brother Philip, whilst apparently engaged on a mission of holy devotion to the religious interests of the Jewish nation.

The ground of John's accusation calls for a heavier emphasis than appears in a superficial consideration of the words. He might have said: "It is not expedient; your wife's father will rise in arms against you, and

threaten the Eastern border of your kingdom. It is not expedient to run the risk of war, which may give Rome a further excuse against you." He might have said: "This is an unwise step, as it will cut you off from your own family, and leave you exposed to the brunt of popular hate." He might have said: "It is impolitic and incautious to risk the adverse judgment of the Emperor." But he said none of these things. He took the matter to a higher court. He arraigned the guilty pair before God; and, laying his axe at the root of the tree—calling on Herod's conscience, long gagged and silent, to take his part in the impeachment—he said, in effect: "I summon you before the bar of God, and in the pure light which streams from his holy Oracle, your consciences being witnesses against you, you know perfectly well that it is not right for you to be living as you are living. 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.'"

Every hearer stood aghast. A death-like hush fell on the assembly, which probably broke up in dismay. So paralyzed was every one that no hand was laid on the preacher. We are expressly told that "Herod *sent forth* and laid hold upon John" (Mark vi. 17); from which we infer that the fearless preacher passed out through the paralyzed and conscience-stricken assemblage, leaving dismay, like that which befell the roysterers in Belshazzar's court, when the hand of the Almighty traced the mysterious characters on the palace wall in lines of fire.

The first feeling of awe and conscience-stricken remorse would, however, soon pass off. Some would hasten to condole with Herodias; some to sympathize with Herod. Herodias would retire to her apartments, accompanied by her high ladies, vowing fiery vengeance on the preacher—a very Jezebel, thirsting for the blood of another Elijah. Throughout Herod's court there would be an effort to dismiss the allusion as "Altogether uncalled for;" as "What might have been expected from such a man;" as "A gross breach of manners;" as "An affront against delicacy of taste."

But Herodias would give her paramour no rest; and, perhaps one evening, when John had retired for meditation and prayer, his disciples being off their guard and the people absent, a handful of soldiers arrested him, bound him, and led him off to the strong castle of Machærus.

II. John's Imprisonment and its Opportunities. —The castle of Machærus was known as "the diadem," or "the black tower." It lay on the east side of the Dead Sea, almost on a line with Bethlehem. The ruins of the castle are still to be seen, in great masses of squared stone, on the top of a lofty hill, surrounded on three sides by unscaleable precipices, descending to such depths that Josephus says the eye could not reach their bottom. The fourth side is described as only a little less terrible. Wild desolation reigned far and near. A German traveller mentions the masses of lava, brown,

red, and black, varied with pumice-stone, distributed in huge broken masses, or rising in perpendicular cliffs; whilst the rushing stream, far below, is overgrown with oleanders and date-palms, willows, poplars, and tall reeds. Here and there, thick mists of steam arise, where the hot sulphur springs gush from the clefts of the rocks.

On this impregnable site, Dr. Geikie tells us that Herod had erected a great wall, enclosing the summit of the hill, with towers two hundred feet high at the corners, and in the space thus gained had built a grand palace, with rows of columns of a single stone apiece, halls lined with many-coloured marbles, magnificent baths, and all the details of Roman luxury, not omitting huge cisterns, barracks, and store-houses, with everything needed in case of a siege. From the windows there was a magnificent view of the Dead Sea, the whole course of the Jordan, Jerusalem, Hebron, the frowning fortress of Masada, and away to the north the wild heights of Pisgah and Abarim. Detached from the palace was a stern and gloomy keep, with underground dungeons still visible, hewn down into the solid rock. This was the scene of John's imprisonment.

The evangelist says expressly that they *bound* the child of the desert-wastes, with his love for dear liberty —sensitive to the touch of the sunshine and the breeze, to the beauty that lay over the hills, accustomed to go and come at his will—as though it were the last indig-

nity and affront to fetter those lithe and supple limbs, and place them under constraint. Ah, it is little short of a sin to encage a wild bird beating its heart against the bars of its narrow cage, when the sun calls it to mount up with quivering ecstasy to the gates of day; but what a sin to bind the preacher of righteousness, and imprison him in sunless vaults—what an agony! What a contrast between the gay revelry that reigned yonder within the palace, and the slow torture which the noble spirit of the Baptist was doomed to suffer through those weary months!

Is there anything like that in your life, my reader? In many an old castle the attention of the visitor is directed to a haunted room, where ghosts are said to walk at night; but in how many hearts there are dark subterranean apartments, where conscience, gagged and bound, lies imprisoned. Outwardly there is the gaiety and mirth as of a palace; but inwardly there is remorse, misery, unrest. In lonely hours there is a voice which pierces the thickest walls of your assumed indifference, and rings up into the house of your life, where the soul seeks to close its ear in vain. It is a sad, monotonous, heart-piercing cry which that voice repeats: "It is not lawful, not lawful, not lawful." Whenever there is a moment of silence and respite, you hear it—"Not lawful, not lawful." And nothing can stay it but repentance, confession, restitution, so far as may be, and the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, which cleanseth from all sin.

From time to time it would seem as though the strictness of John's imprisonment was relaxed. His disciples were permitted to see him and tell him of what was happening in the world without; but stranger than all, he was summoned to have audiences with Herod himself.

Another rendering of Mark vi. 19, 20, which is perfectly legitimate, and is favoured by the R. V., suggests that the King was ill at ease, and swept to and fro by very different currents.

First, he was deeply incensed. As he thought of the manner in which the Baptist had treated him, denouncing him before his court, the fire of anger burnt fiercely within his breast; and he had beside him a Lady Macbeth, a beautiful fiend and temptress, who knew that whilst the Baptist lived, and dared to speak as he had done, her position was not safe. She knew Herod well enough to dread the uprising of his conscience at the appeals of truth. And perpetually, when she saw her chance, she whispered in Herod's ear, "The sooner you do away with that man the better. You don't love me perfectly, as long as you permit him to breathe. Unmannerly cur!" "Herodias set herself against him, and desired to kill him; but she could not."

On the other side, Herod was in fear. He feared John, "knowing that he was a righteous man and a holy." He feared the people, because they held him for a prophet. And beneath all, he feared God, lest He

should step in to avenge any wrong perpetrated against his servant.

Between these two influences he was "much perplexed" (Mark vi. 20, R. V.). When he was with Herodias, he thought as she did, and left her, almost resolved to give the fatal order; but when he was alone, the other influence made itself felt, and he would send for John:

"I would like to see him again, Chamberlain—tell the gaoler to send the Baptist hither; let his coming to my private room be, however, kept secret. I don't want all my court blabbing."

And the gaoler would come to the cell door, and call to his prisoner, with a mixture of effrontery and obsequiousness, "Up, man; the King wants you. Put on your softest speech. It will serve you better than that rasping tongue of yours. Why cannot you leave the King and his private affairs alone? They are no business of yours or mine."

And might not Herod attempt to induce the prophet to take back his ruthless sentence? "Come," he might say, "you remember what you said. If you unsay that sentence, I will set you free. I cannot, out of respect for my consort, allow such words to remain unretracted. There, you have your freedom in your own hands. One word of apology, and you may go your way; and my solemn bond is yours, that you shall be kept free from molestation."

If such an offer were made, it must have presented a

strong temptation to the emaciated captive, whose physique had already lost the elasticity and vigour of his early manhood, and was showing signs of his grievous privation. But he had no alternative; and, however often the ordeal was repeated, he met the royal solicitation with the same unwavering reply: "I have no alternative. It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife. I should betray my God, and act treacherously to thyself, if I were to take back one word which I have spoken; and thou knowest that it is so." And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and a judgment to come, the royal culprit trembled.

John could do no other; but it was a sublime act of devotion to God and Truth. He had no thought for himself at all, and thought only of the choice and destiny of that guilty pair, from which he would warn and save them, if he might. Well might the Lord ask, in after days, if John were a reed shaken with the wind. Rather he resembled a forest tree, whose deeply-struck and far-spreading roots secure it against the attack of the hurricane; or a mighty Alp, which defies the tremor of the earthquake and rears its head above the thunderstorms, which break upon its slopes, to hold fellowship with the skies.

How many men are like Herod! They resemble the superficial ground, on which the seed springs into rapid and unnatural growth; but the rock lies close beneath the surface. Now they are swayed by the voice of the preacher, and moved by the pleadings of conscience,

allowed for one brief moment to utter its protests and remonstrances; and then they feel the fascination of their sin, that unholy passion, that sinful habit, that ill-gotten gain—and are sucked back from the beach, on which they were almost free, into the sea of ink and death.

You may be trying, my reader, to steer a middle course between John the Baptist and Herodias. Now you resolve to get free of her guilty charms, and break the spell that fascinates you. Merlin will emancipate himself from Vivien, before she learn his secret, and dance with it down the wood, leaving him dishonoured and ashamed. But, within an hour, the Syren is again singing her dulcet notes, and drawing the ship closer and closer to the rocks, with their black teeth, waiting to grind it to splinters. Oh that there might come to you the voice that spoke with such power to Augustine, and that like him you might now and here yield yourself to it, so that when the temptress, whatever form she may assume, approaches you with the whisper: "I am *she,* Augustine," you may answer: "But I am not *he!*"

So John was left in prison. Month after month he languished in the dark and stifling dungeon, wondering a little, now and again, why the Master, if He were the Son of God, did not interpose to work his deliverance. But of that anon.

III. Herod's Inevitable Deterioration.—Again and again John was remanded back to his cell. Prob-

ably twelve months passed thus. But each time the King failed to act on the preacher's remonstrances; he became more impervious to his appeals, more liable to the sway of passion. Thus, when a supreme moment came, in which he was under the influence of drink and unholy appetite, and the reign of such moral nature as remained was greatly enfeebled, it is not to be wondered at that Herodias had her way, and before her murderous request the last thin fence of resistance broke down, and he gave orders that it should be as she desired.

The story does not end here. He not only murdered John the Baptist, but he inflicted a deadly wound on his own moral nature, from which it never recovered, as we shall see. Ultimately he had no thought in the presence of Christ than to see Him work a miracle; and when his desire was refused, set Him at nought with his mighty men, mocked his claims to be the King of Israel, did not scruple to treat Him with indignity and violence, and so dismissed Him.

Is it wonderful that our Lord was speechless before such a man? What else could He be? The deterioration had been so awful and complete. For the love of God can say nothing to us, though it be prepared to die on our behalf, so long as we refuse to repent of, and put away, our sin. We remember some solemn words, which may be applied in all their fearful significance to that scene: "There is a sin unto death; not concerning this do I say that he should make request."

XI

Art Thou He?

(Matthew xi.)

"He fought his doubts and gathered strength,
He would not make his judgment blind,
He faced the spectres of the mind
And laid them:—thus he came, at length,

"To find a stronger faith his own,
And Power was with him in the night,
Which makes the darkness and the light,
And dwells not in the light alone."

Tennyson.

IT is very touching to remark the tenacity with which some few of John's disciples clung to their great leader. The majority had dispersed: some to their homes; some to follow Jesus. Only a handful lingered still, not alienated by the storm of hate which had broken on their Master, but drawn nearer, with the unfaltering loyalty of unchangeable affection. They could not forget what he had been to them—that he had first called them to the reality of living; that he had taught them to pray; that he had led them to the Christ: and they dare not desert him now, in the dark, sad days of his imprisonment and sorrow.

What an inestimable blessing to have friends like

this, who will not leave our side when the crowd ebbs, but draw closer as the shadows darken over our path, and the prison damp wraps its chill mantle about us! To be loved like that is earth's deepest bliss! These heroic souls risked all the peril that might accrue to themselves from this identification with their master; they did not hesitate to come to his cell with tidings of the great outer world, and specially of what *He* was doing and saying, whose life was so mysteriously bound up with his own. "The disciples of John told him of all these things" (Luke vii. 18, R. V.).

It was to two of these choice and steadfast friends that John confided the question which had long been forming within his soul, and forcing itself to the front. "And John, calling unto him two of his disciples, sent them to the Lord, saying, Art Thou He that cometh, or look we for another?"

I. JOHN'S MISGIVINGS.—Can this be he who, but a few months ago, had stood in his rock-hewn pulpit, in radiant certainty? The brilliant eastern sunlight that bathed his figure, as he stood erect amid the thronging crowds, was the emblem and symbol of the light that filled his soul. No misgiving crossed it. He pointed to Christ with unfaltering certitude, saying, This is He, the Lamb of God, the Son of the Father, the Bridegroom of the soul. How great the contrast between that and this sorrowful cry, "Art Thou He?"

Some commentators, to save his credit, have sup-

posed that the embassy was sent to the Lord for the sake of the disciples, that their hearts might be opened, their faith confirmed—and that they might have a head and leader when he was gone. But the narrative has to be greatly strained and dragged out of its obvious course to make it cover the necessities of such an hypothesis. It is more natural to think that John the Baptist was for a brief spell under a cloud, involved in doubt, tempted to let go the confidence that had brought him such ecstatic joy when he first saw the Dove descending and abiding.

The Bible does not scruple to tell us of the failures of its noblest children: of Abram, thinking that the Egyptians would take his life; of Elijah, stretching himself beneath the shadow of the desert bush, and asking that he might die; of Thomas, who had been prepared to die with his Lord, but could not believe that He was risen. And in this the Spirit of God has rendered us untold service, because we learn that the material out of which He made the greatest saints was flesh and blood like ourselves; and that it was by Divine grace, manifested very conspicuously towards them, that they became what they were. If only the ladder rests on the low earth, where we live and move and have our being, there is some hope of our climbing to stand with others who have ascended its successive rungs and reached the starry heights. Yes, let us believe that, for some days at least, John's mind was overcast, his faith lost its foothold, and he seemed to be falling into bot-

tomless depths. *He sent them to Jesus, saying, Art Thou He that should come?* We can easily trace this lapse of faith to three sources.

(1) *Depression.* He was the child of the desert. The winds that swept across the waste were not freer. The boundless spaces of the Infinite had stretched above him, in vaulted immensity, when he slept at night or wrought through the busy days; and as he found himself cribbed, cabined, and confined in the narrow limits of his cell, his spirits sank. He pined with the hunger of a wild thing for liberty—to move without the clanking fetters; to drink of the fresh water of the Jordan; to breathe the morning air; to look on the expanse of nature. Is it hard to understand how his deprivations reacted on his mental and spiritual organization, or that his nervous system lost its elasticity of tone, or that the depression of his physical life cast a shadow on his soul?

We are all so highly strung, so delicately balanced. Often the lack of spiritual joy and peace and power in prayer is attributable to nothing else than our confinement in the narrow limits of a tiny room; to the foul, gaseous air we are compelled to breathe; to our inability to get beyond the great city, with its wilderness of brick, into the country, with its blossoms, fields, and woodland glades. In a large number of spiritual maladies the physician is more necessary than the minister of religion; a holiday by the seaside or on the mountains, than a convention.

What an infinite comfort it is to be told that God knows how easily our nature may become jangled and out of tune. He can attribute our doubts and fears to their right source. He knows the bow is bent to the point of breaking, and the string strained to its utmost tension. He does not rebuke his servants when they cast themselves under juniper bushes, and ask to die; but sends them food and sleep. And when they send from their prisons, saying, Art Thou He? there is no word of rebuke, but of tender encouragement and instruction.

(2) *Disappointment.* When first consigned to prison, he had expected every day that Jesus would in some way deliver him. Was He not the opener of prison-doors? Was not all power at his disposal? Did He not wield the sceptre of the house of David? Surely He would not let his faithful follower lie in the despair of that dark dungeon? In that first sermon in Nazareth, of which he had been informed, was it not expressly stated to be part of the Divine programme, for which He had been anointed, that He would open prison-doors, and proclaim liberty to captives? He would surely then send his angels to open his prison-doors, and lead him forth into the light!

But the weeks grew to months, and still no help came. It was inexplicable to John's honest heart, and suggested the fear that he had been mistaken after all. We can sympathize in this also. Often in our lives we have counted on God's interfering to deliver us

from some intolerable sorrow. With ears alert, and our heart throbbing with expectancy, we have lain in our prison-cell listening for the first faint footfall of the angel; but the weary hours have passed without bringing him, and we have questioned whether God were mindful of his own; whether prayer prevailed; whether the promises were to be literally appropriated by *us?*

(3) *Partial views of Christ.* "John heard in the prison the works of Jesus." They were wholly beneficent and gentle.

"What has He done since last you were here?"

"He has laid his hands on a few sick folk, and healed them; has gathered a number of children to his arms, and blessed them; has sat on the mountain, and spoken of rest and peace and blessedness."

"Yes; good. But what more?"

"A woman touched the hem of his garment, and trembled, and confessed, and went away healed."

"Good! But what more?"

"Well, there were some blind men, and He laid his hands on them, and they saw."

"Is that all? Has He not used the fan to winnow the wheat, and the fire to burn up the chaff? This is what I was expecting, and what I have been taught to expect by Isaiah and the rest of the prophets. I cannot understand it. This quiet, gentle life of benevolence is outside my calculations. There must be some mistake. Go and ask Him if we should not expect *an-*

other, made in a different mould, and who shall be as the fire, the earthquake, the tempest, while He is as the still small voice."

John had partial views of the Christ—he thought of Him only as the Avenger of sin, the Maker of revolution, the dread Judge of all. There was apparently no room in his conception for the gentler, sweeter, tenderer aspects of his Master's nature. And for want of a clearer understanding of what God by the mouth of his holy prophets had spoken since the world began, he fell into this Slough of Despond.

It was a grievous pity; yet let us not blame him too vehemently, lest we blame ourselves. Is not this what we do? We form a notion of God, partly from what we think He ought to be, partly from some distorted notions we have derived from others; and then because God fails to realize our conception, we begin to doubt. We think, for instance, that if there be a righteous God, He will not permit wrong to triumph; little children to suffer for the sins of their parents; the innocent to be trodden beneath the foot of the oppressor and the proud; or the dumb creatures to be tortured in the supposed interest of medical science. Surely God will step out of his hiding-place and open all prisons, emancipate all captives, and wave a hand of benediction over all creation. Thus we think and say; and then, because the world still groans and travails, we question whether God is in his high heaven. Like John, men have a notion, founded on some faulty knowledge of

Scripture, that God will act in a certain preconceived way, in the thunder, the whirlwind, and the fire; and when God does not, but pursues his tender, gentle ministries, descending in summer showers speaking in soft, still tones distilling in the dew-drops, winning his empire over men by love, they say—"Is this He?"

II. The Lord's Reply.—"In that hour He cured many of diseases, and plagues, and evil spirits; and on many that were blind He bestowed sight." Through the long hours of the day, the disciples stood in the crowd, whilst the pitiable train of sick and demon-possessed passed before the Saviour, coming in every stage of need, and going away cleansed and saved. Even the dead were raised. And at the close the Master turned to them, and with a deep significance in his tone, said, "Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good tidings preached to them. And blessed is he whosoever shall find none occasion of stumbling in Me."

(1) *It was indirect.* He did not say, I am He that was to come, and there is no need to look for another. Had He done so, He might have answered John's intellect, but not his heart. After a few hours the assurance would have waxed dim, and he would have questioned again. He might have wondered whether Christ were not Himself deceived. One question al-

ways leads to another so long as the heart is unsatisfied; hence the refusal on the part of our Lord to answer the question, and his evident determination to allay the restlessness and disquietude of the heart that throbbed beneath.

God might, had He so willed, have written in starry characters across the sky the Divine words, "I am Jehovah, and ye shall have no other gods beside Me"; or He might have flashed it, and obliterated it to flash it again, as the electric cylinders which serve the purposes of advertisements in our large cities by night. This might have awed the intellect, but it would not have convinced the heart. Were this God's method, we should miss the benediction on those who have not seen and yet have believed. We should miss the discipline of waiting until our doubts are dissolved by the Spirit of God. The intellect might be temporarily overpowered with the evidence; but the soul, the heart, and the spirit, would miss the true knowledge that comes through purity, faith, and waiting upon God—the deepest knowledge of all. Besides, though one were to rise from the dead, and come to men with the awe of the vision of the other world stamped on his face, they would not believe. The evidence of the unseen and eternal must be given, not to the startled physical sense, but to the soul. Some other deeper method must be adopted; the heart must be taught to wait, trust, and accept those deep intuitions and revelations which establish the Being of God.

(2) *The answer was mysterious.* Surely, if He were able to do so much, He could do more. The power that healed the sick and lame and blind, and cast out demons, could surely deliver John. It made his heart the more wistful, to hear of these displays of power. He had to learn that the Lord healed these poor souls so easily because the light soil of their nature could not bear the richer harvests; because their soul could not stand the cutting through by which alone the brilliant facets which were possible to his could be secured. It was because John was a royal soul, the greatest of woman born, because his nature was capable of yielding the best results to the Divine culture, that he was kept waiting, whilst others caught up the blessing and went away healed. Only three months remained of life, and in these the discipline of patience and doubt must do their perfect work.

That is where you have made a mistake. You have thought God was hard on you, that He would help everybody but you; but you have not understood that your nature was so dear to God, and so precious in his sight, and so capable of the greatest development, that God loved you too much to let you off so lightly, and give you what you wanted, and send you on your way. God could have given you sight, made that lame foot well, restored the child to health, and opened the iron prison door of your circumstances. *He could;* but for all eternity you will thank Him He did not, because you are capable of something else. We are kept waiting

through the long years—not that He loves us less, but more; not that He refuses what we ask, but that in the long strain and tension He is making us partakers of his blessedness. John's nature would presently yield a martyr and win a martyr's crown: was not that reason enough for not giving him at once the deliverance he sought?

(3) *The answer was sufficient.* Together with the works of beneficence, the Lord drew John's attention to words he seemed in danger of forgetting: "Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees. Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened; and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped; then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing; for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert." "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord hath anointed Me to preach good tidings unto the meek; He hath sent Me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound." The Lord strove to convince the questioner that his views were too partial and limited, and to send him back to a more comprehensive study of the old Scriptures. It was as though Jesus said, "Go to your master, and tell him to take again the ancient prophecy and study it. He has taken

the sterner predictions to the neglect of the gentler, softer ones. It is true that I am to proclaim the day of vengeance; but first I must reveal the acceptable year. It is true that I am to come as a Mighty One, and my arm shall rule for me; but it is also true that I am to feed my flock like a Shepherd, and gather the lambs in my arm."

We make the same mistake. We have but a partial view of Christ, and need to get back to the Bible afresh, and study anew its comprehensive words; then we shall come to understand that the present is the time of the hiding of his power, the time of waiting, the time of the gentler ministries. Some day He will gird on his sword; some day He will winnow his floor: some day He will ride in a chariot of flame; some day He will sit upon the throne and judge those who oppress the innocent and take advantage of the poor. We have not yet seen the end of the Lord: we have not all the evidence. This is our mistake. But our Saviour is offering us every day evidences of his Divine and loving power. Last week I saw Him raise the dead; yesterday, before my eyes, He struck the chains from a prisoner; at this hour He is giving sight to the blind; tomorrow He will cast out demons. The world is full of evidences of his gracious and Divine power. They are not so striking and masterful as deeds of judgment and wrath might be—they need a quicker eye, a purer heart to discern; but they are not less significant of the fact that He liveth who was dead, and that He is alive

for evermore. And these are sufficient, not only because of the transformations which are effected, but because of their moral quality, to show that there is One within the veil who lives in the power of an indissoluble life.

III. A New Beatitude.—"Blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in Me." Our Lord put within the reach of his noble forerunner the blessedness of those who have not seen and yet have believed; of those who trust though they are slain; of those who wait the Lord's leisure; and of those who cannot understand his dealings, but rest in what they know of his heart. This is the beatitude of the unoffended, of those who do not stumble over the mystery of God's dealings with their life.

This blessedness is within our reach also. There are times when we are overpowered with the mystery of life and nature. The world is so full of pain and sorrow, the litany of its need is so sad and pitiful, strong hearts are breaking under an intolerable load; whilst the battle seems only to the strong and the race to those who, by some mysterious Providence, come of a healthy, though not specially moral or religious stock. And if the incidence of pain and sorrow on the world be explained by its ungodliness, why does nature groan and travail? why are the forest glades turned into a very shambles? why does creation seem to achieve itself through the terrific struggle for survival?

God's children are sometimes the most bitterly tried. For them the fires are heated seven times; days of weariness and nights of pain are appointed them; they suffer, not only at the hand of man, but it seems as though God Himself were turned against them, to become their enemy. The heavens are like brass to their cries and tears, and the enemy has reason to challenge them with the taunt, "Where is now your God!" The waters of a full cup are wrung out in days like these; and the cry is extorted, "How long, O Lord, how long?"

You and I have been in this plight. We have said, "Hath God forgotten to be gracious? Has He in anger shut up his tender mercies?" From our prison-cell we send up the appeal to our Brother in the Glory: "Help us; for if Thou leavest us to our fate we shall question if Thou art He." We are tempted to stumbling. We are like to fall over the mysteries of God's dealings with us. We are more able than ever before to appreciate the standpoint occupied by Job's wife, when she said to her husband, "Curse God, and die."

Then we have the chance of inheriting a new beatitude. By refusing to bend under the mighty hand of God—questioning, chafing, murmuring—we miss the door which would admit us into rich and unalloyed happiness. We fumble about the latch, but it is not lifted. But if we will quiet our souls like a weaned child, anointing our heads, and washing our faces, light will break in on us as from the eternal morning; the

peace of God will keep our hearts and minds, and we shall enter on the blessedness which our Lord unfolded before the gaze of his faithful forerunner.

"Art Thou He that cometh?" We are always expecting something to happen, some one to come. "But the King of all Ages is here." The Refiner sits by the crucible, his face intent on the changing emotions of the soul which is becoming a partaker of his holiness.

XII

None Greater than John the Baptist, yet . . .

(Matthew xi.)

"Search thine own heart. What paineth thee
In others, in thyself may be;
All dust is frail, all flesh is weak;
Be thou the same man thou dost seek.

"Where now with pain thou treadest, trod
The whitest of the saints of God!
To show thee where their feet were set,
The light which led them shineth yet."

Whittier.

WHILST John's disciples were standing there, our Lord said nothing in his praise; but as soon as they had departed, the flood-gates of his heart were thrown wide open, and He began to speak to the multitudes concerning his faithful servant. It was as though He would give him no cause for pride by what He said. He desired to give his friend no additional temptation during those lonely hours. We say our kind things before each other's faces; our hard things when their backs are turned. It is not so with Christ. He passes his most generous encomiums when we are not there to hear them. Christ may never tell you how greatly He loves and values you; but whilst

you lie there in your prison, with sad and overcast heart, He is saying and thinking great things about you yonder.

I. The Time Chosen for the Lord's Commendation of the Baptist.—It was when John had fallen beneath his usual level, below high-water mark, that Jesus uttered his warmest and most generous words of appreciation—"Among them that are born of women, there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist."

"But, dost Thou really mean, most Holy Lord, that this is one of the greatest born of woman?"

"Certainly," saith Christ, in effect.

"But he has asked if thou art really the Messiah."

"I know it," saith the Lord.

"But how canst Thou say that he is to be compared with Moses, Isaiah, or Daniel? Did they doubt Thee thus? And how canst Thou say that he is not a reed shaken with the wind, when, but now he gave patent evidence that he was stooping beneath the hurrying tread of gales of doubt and depression?"

"Ah," the Master seems to say, "Heaven judges, not by a passing mood, but by the general tenor and trend of a man's life; not by the expression of a doubt, caused by accidents which may be explained, but by the soul of man within him, which is as much deeper than the emotions as the heart of the ocean is deeper than the cloud-shadows, which hurry across its surface."

Yes, the Lord judges us by that which is deepest, most permanent, most constant and prevalent with us; by the ideal we seek to apprehend; by the decision and choice of our soul; by that bud of possibility which lies as yet furled, and unrealized even by ourselves.

There is a remarkable parallel to this incident in the Old Testament. When we are first introduced to Gideon, the youngest son of Joash the Abiezrite, he is not in a very dignified position. He is threshing wheat in the wine-press, to hide it from the hosts of Midian, which devoured the produce of the entire country. There was no moral wrong in eluding the vigilance of the Midian spies, in transporting the wheat from the open country, where the wind might fan away the chaff, to the comparative seclusion and unlikeliness of the wine-press; but there was nothing specially heroic nor inspiring in the spectacle. Yet, when the angel of the Lord appeared unto him, he said, "The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour."

"Mighty man of valour!" At first there is an apparent incongruity between this high-sounding salutation and the bearing of the man to whom it was addressed. Surely such an address is far-fetched and fulsome; yet subsequent events proved that every syllable of it was deservedly true. Gideon was a mighty man of valour, and God was with him. The heavenly messenger read beneath the outward passing incident, and saw under the clumsy letters of the palimpsest the deep

and holy characters which were awaiting the moment of complete discovery.

Is not this, in fact, the meaning of the apostle, when he says that faith is reckoned to us for righteousness? In the fullest sense, of course, we know that to each believer in Jesus there is reckoned the entire benefit of his glorious person and work, so that we are accepted in the Beloved, and He is made unto us . . . Righteousness. But there is another sense, in which faith is reckoned to us for righteousness, because it contains within itself the power and potency of the perfect life. It is the seed-germ from which is developed in due course the plant, the flower, the bud, the seed, and the reproduction of the plant, in unending succession. God reckoned to Abraham all that his faith was capable of producing, which it did produce, and which it would have produced had he possessed all the advantages which pertain to our own happy lot. There is thus the objective and the subjective: in virtue of the first, through faith in Jesus, all his righteousness is accounted to us; in virtue of the second, God reckons to us all that blessed flowering and fruitage of which our faith will be capable, when patience has had its perfect work and we are perfect and entire, wanting nothing.

II. The Outstanding Features of John's Character and Ministry to which our Lord drew attention.—(1) *His Independence.* "What went ye out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken with

the wind?" The language of the Bible is so picturesque, so full of natural imagery, that it appeals to every age, and speaks in every language of the world. If its descriptions of character had been given in the language of the philosopher or academist, what was intelligible to one age would have been perplexing or meaningless to the next. Remember that the long gallery in the Pyramids, which was directed to the pole-star when they were constructed, is now hopelessly out of course, because the position of the pole-star, in relation to the earth, has so entirely altered; and what is true among the spheres is true in the use of terms. But the Word of God employs natural figures and parables, which the wayfaring man, though a fool, comprehends at a glance.

Who, for instance, on a gusty March day, has not watched the wind blowing lustily across a marsh or the reedy margin of a lake, compelling all the reeds to stoop in the same direction? Has one resisted the current or stood stoutly forth in protesting non-compliance? Has one dared to adopt an unbending posture? Not one. They have been as obsequious as were all the king's servants that were in the king's gate to the imperious Haman when he happened to enter the palace.

Thus, when our Lord asked the people whether John resembled a reed shaken by the wind, and implied their answer in the negative, could He have more clearly indicated one of the most salient characteristics of John's career—his daring singularity, his independence of

mere custom and fashion, his determination to follow out the pattern of his own life as God revealed it to him? In this he resembles the good Nehemiah, when he refers to the usual practice of men of his position, and says, "So did not I, because of the fear of the Lord"; or the three young men who, when all the myriads fell down and worshipped Nebuchadnezzar's golden image, remained erect. In the singularity of his dress and food; in the originality of his message and demand for baptism; in his independence of the religious teachers and schools of his time; in his refusal to countenance the flagrant sins of the various classes of the community, and especially in his uncompromising denunciation of Herod's sin—he proved himself to be as a sturdy oak in the forest of Bashan, or a deeply-rooted cedar in Lebanon, and not as a reed shaken by the wind.

Many a saintly soul has followed him since along this difficult and lonely track. Indeed, it is the ordinary path for most of the choicest spirits of these Christian centuries. I do not say of all, because the Great Gardener has his violets and lilies in sheltered spots; but certainly most of the trees of his right-hand planting have not stood thickly-planted in the sheltered woodland, but have braved the winds sweeping in at the gates of the hills.

You, my reader, admire, but feel you cannot follow. When your companions and friends are speaking depreciating and ungenerous words of some public man,

whom you love; when unkind and scandalous stories are being passed from lip to lip; when a storm of execration and hatred is being poured on a cause, which in your heart you favour and espouse—you find it easier to bow before the gale, with all the other reeds around you, than to enter your protest, even though you stand alone. Yet the reed thrust by the soldiers into the hands of Christ may become the rod of iron with which He rules the nations. He can take the most pliant and yielding natures, and make them, as He made Jeremiah, "a defenced city, and an iron pillar, and brazen walls, against the whole land." Thou canst not; but He can. He will strengthen thee; yea, He will help thee; yea, He will uphold thee with the right hand of his righteousness. Keep looking steadfastly up to Him, that He may teach thy hands to war, and thy fingers to fight; for thou shalt be able to do all things through Him that strengtheneth thee.

(2) *His simplicity.* A second time the Master asked the people what they went forth into the wilderness to behold; and by his question implied that John was no Sybarite clothed in soft raiment, and feasting in luxury, but a strong, pure soul, that had learnt the secret of self-denial and self-control. Too many of us are inclined to put on the soft raiment of self-indulgence and luxury. We are the slaves of fashion, or we are perpetually considering what shall we eat, what shall we drink, and with what we shall be clothed: or we act as though we supposed that life consisted in the number

of things we possessed, and the variety of servants that waited upon us: whereas the exact contrary is the case. The real happiness of life consists not in increasing our possessions, but in limiting our wants.

To all my young brothers and sisters who may read this page and who have yet the making of their lives in their own hands, I would say, with all my heart, learn to do without the soft clothing and the many servants which characterize kings' courts. At table have your eye on the simpler dishes, those which supply the maximum of nutriment and strength, and do not allow your choice to be determined by what pleases the palate or gratifies the taste. A young friend stood me out the other day against some article of diet, which was acknowledge to be the more nutritious (it was wholemeal bread), because another was sweeter and more palatable (some white, light French rolls, from which all the nutriment had been extracted). This is the deliberate preference of the fare of kings' courts to Daniel's pulse and the Baptist's locusts and wild honey. Please note, here, that there was nothing inconsistent in his taking honey. We are not to refuse a certain diet because it is pleasant; but we are not to choose it because it is so.

So with dress. Our Master does not require of us to dress grotesquely, or to attract notice by the singularity and grotesqueness of our attire. We must dress suitably and in conformity with that station in life to which He has called us. But what a difference there

is between making our dress our main consideration, and considering first and foremost the attire of the soul in meekness and truth, purity and unselfishness. They who are set upon these, may be trusted to put the other in the right place. But, on the whole, the truly consecrated soul should study simplicity. It should not endeavour to attract notice by glaring colours or extravagant display. It ought not to seek a large variety of dresses and costumes, but be satisfied with what may be really needed for the exigencies of climate and health. Let it take no pleasure in vying with others, because dress is a question of utility and not of pride. On the whole, we should set our faces against the soft raiment which enervates the health, and unfits us to stretch out our hands in ready help to those who need assistance along the highways of life.

So with service. It is not well to depend on others. If it is part of our lot to be surrounded by servants, let us accept their offices with grace and kindliness, but never allow ourselves to lean on them. We should know how to do everything for ourselves, and be prepared to do it whenever it is necessary. Of course, with some of us, it is essential that we should have servants, that we may be set free to do the special work of our lives. Nothing would be more unfortunate than that those who are highly gifted in some special direction should fritter away their time and strength in doing trifles which others could do for them equally well. To think of a physician whose consulting room

was crowded with patients, needing help which he alone, of all men living, could give, spending the precious morning hours in the minutiæ of household arrangements, blacking his boots, or preparing his food! Let these things be left to those who cannot do the higher work to which he is called.

This is the secret of making the best of your life. Discover what you can do best—the one thing which you are called to do for others, and which probably no one else can do so well. Set yourself to do this, devolving on voluntary or paid helpers all that they can do as well as, and perhaps better than, yourself. It was in this spirit that the apostles said, "It is not fit that we should forsake the Word of God and serve tables. Look ye out, therefore, men . . . whom we may appoint over this business; but we will continue steadfastly in prayer, and in the ministry of the Word."

It is specially the temptation of Eastern life, where the climate is enervating and service is cheap and plentiful, to seek the soft raiment and the large assistance of attendants, and it is almost impossible to yield to one or the other without relaxing the fibre of the soul. The temptation is always around us; and it is well to look carefully into our life from time to time, to be quite sure, lest almost insensibly its strong energetic spirit may not be in process of deterioration, as the soldiers of Hannibal in the plains of Capua. If so, resolve to do without, not for merit's sake, but to conserve the strength and simplicity of your soul.

(3) *His noble office.* "But wherefore went ye out? —to see a prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet." Nothing is more difficult than to measure men while they are living. Whilst the fascination of their presence and the music of their voice are in the air, we are apt to exaggerate their worth. The mountain towers so far above us that we are apt, in the absence of other mountains, or in our too great proximity to it, to think of it as the greatest of all the mountain-range. But it is not so, as we discover when we remove further. But subsequent ages, so far from correcting, have only confirmed our Saviour's estimate of his forerunner. We are able to locate him in the Divine economy. He was a prophet, yes, and much more. To employ the predictive words of Malachi, he was Jehovah's messenger, the courier who announced the advent of the King, the last of the prophets—for all the prophets and the law prophesied until John—and the herald of that new and greater era, whose gates he opened, but into which he was not permitted to enter.

But our Lord went further, and did not hesitate to class John with the greatest of those born of woman. He was absolutely in the front rank. He may have had peers, but no superiors; equals, but no over-lords. Who may be classed with him, we cannot, dare not, say. But probably Abraham, Moses, Paul. "There hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist." No brighter star shines in the celestial firmament than that

of this brief young life, which had only time enough to proclaim the advent of the Lord, and after some brief six months of ministry by the Jordan, followed by twelve months in the gaol, waned here to shine in undimming brilliancy yonder.

There was a further tribute paid by our Lord to his noble servant. Some two or three centuries before, Malachi had foretold that Elijah, the prophet, would be sent before the great and terrible day of the Lord came; and the Jews were always on the outlook for his coming. Even to the present day a chair is set for him at their religious feasts. This is what was meant when they asked the Baptist, at the commencement of his ministry, if he were Elijah. He shrank, as we have seen, from assuming so great a name, though he could not have refused the challenge, had it been worded to include the spirit and power of the great prophet of Tishbe. But here our Lord went beyond John's own modest, self-depreciating estimate, and declared, "If ye are willing to receive it, this is Elijah which is to come." As He descended from the Mount of Transfiguration, He returned to the same subject: "And they asked Him, saying, The scribes say that Elijah must first come. And He said unto them, Elijah indeed cometh first, and restoreth all things. . . . But I say unto you that Elijah is come, and they have also done unto him whatsoever they listed, even as it is written of him" (Mark ix. 9-13).

III. The Master's Reservation.—"Yet he that is but little in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." John ushered in the kingdom, but was not in it. He proclaimed a condition of blessedness in which he was not permitted to have a part. And the Lord says that to be in that kingdom gives a greatness which the great souls outside its precincts cannot lay claim to.

There is a greatness which comes from Nature, and another greatness from circumstances. The child on the mountain is higher than the giant in the valley. The boy in our village schools knows more on certain subjects than Socrates or Confucius, the greatest sages of the world. The least instructed in the kingdom of heaven is privileged to see and hear the things which prophets and kings longed and waited for in vain. The least in the higher dispensation may know and understand more than the loftiest souls of the dispensations that have preceded.

And may there not be even more than this? The character of John was strong, grand in its wild magnificence—like some Alpine crag, with the pines on its slopes and the deep dark lake at its foot; he had courage, resolution, an iron will, a loftiness of soul that could hold commerce with the unseen and the eternal. He was a man capable of vast heights and depths. He could hold fellowship with the eternal God as a man speaks with his friend, and could suffer unutterable agonies in self-questioning and depression. But is this

the loftiest type of character? Is it the ideal and most blessed? Assuredly not; and this may have been in the Saviour's mind when He made his notable reservation. To come neither eating nor drinking; to be stern, reserved, and lonely; to live apart from the homes of men; to be the severe and unflinching rebuker of other men's sins—this was not the loftiest pattern of human character.

There was something else, and more akin to our Lord's own perfect manhood. The balance of quality, the power to converse with God, mated with the tenderness that enters the homes of men, wipes the tears of those that mourn, and gathers little children to its side; that has an ear for every complaint, and a balm of comfort for every heart-break; that pities and soothes, teaches and leads; that cannot only commune with God alone in the desert, but brings Him into the lowliest deeds and commonplaces of human life—this is the type of character which is common to the kingdom of heaven. It is described best in those inimitable beatitudes which canonize, not the stern and rugged, but the sweet and tender, the humble and meek; and stamp heaven's tenderest smile on virtues which had hardly found a place in the strong and gritty character of the Baptist.

Yes, there is more to be had by the humble heart than John possessed or taught. We must seek the passive and the active; the glen and the bare mountain

peak; the feminine and the masculine; the power to wait and be still, and the swift rush to capture the position; the cross and shame as well as the throne of power. And if thou art the least in the Kingdom of God, all this may be thine, by the Holy Spirit, who introduces the very nature of the Son of Man into the heart that loves Him truly. "He that is least in the kingdom of heaven (*i. e.*, who possesses all the qualities for which the Gospel stands) is greater than he."

XIII

A Burning and Shining Light.

(John v. 35.)

"Men as men
Can reach no higher than the Son of God,
The Perfect Head and Pattern of Mankind.
The time is short, and thus sufficeth us
To live and die by; and in Him again
We see the same first starry attribute,
'*Perfect through suffering*,' our salvation's seal,
Set in the front of His humanity. . . ."

Mrs. Hamilton King.

OUR Master, Christ, was on his trial. He was challenged by the religious leaders of the people because He had dared to heal a man and to command him to carry his bed—his straw pallet—on the Sabbath day. He was therefore accused, and, so to speak, put in his defence.

Of course we must not for a moment think that our Lord was lax in his observance of the Sabbath, but simply that He desired to emancipate the day from the intolerable burdens and restrictions with which the Jewish leaders had surrounded it. It was his desire to show, for all after time, that the Sabbath was made for useful purposes, and specially for deeds of mercy,

beneficence, and gentle kindness. The Lord Jesus was maligned and persecuted because He was the Emancipator of the Sabbath day from foolish and mistaken notions of sanctity.

It is of the greatest importance that we should do what we may to conserve one rest-day in seven to our country and our world; and I cannot help noticing in the story of the life of the great statesman and Christian, who has lately passed from us, how careful he was to guard the day from unnecessary intrusion. It has been attested by those who knew him well, that physically, intellectually, and spiritually, the Lord's day was a priceless blessing. Any one who entered his room in Downing Street on that day, even during the height of the season, could hardly fail to be struck by the atmosphere of repose; the books lying open near the arm-chair, the deserted writing-table, and the absence of papers and newspapers. From Saturday night to Monday morning he put away all business of a secular nature.

This tribute on the part of Mr. Gladstone to the observance of the Lord's day should make a definite impression upon us all. No man was busier than he—no man had more attractions to society than he had; and yet he put around that day the holy enclosure of sacred custom. Let your rest on the one rest-day consist, not in lolling idly and carelessly, but in turning your faculties in some other direction; because the truest rest is to be found, not in luxurious ease, but in using the

fresh vigour of your life in other compartments of the brain than those which have been worn by the demands of the six days. Then, fresh from the Sunday school class, the worship of the church, and the sermon, you will return to the desk or office, or whatever may be your toil, with new and rejuvenated strength.

In this case, the Lord being on his trial, He proposed to call witnesses. He said, in effect, "If I were in need of witnesses, I would put in as evidence on my side, first, your own holy Scriptures; for as you search them you will find they speak of Me. Secondly, I would put in evidence the works or miracles I do—the miracles of love and help, of comfort and blessing. Is it likely these miracles could have been performed by a blasphemer—by one who did not deserve your confidence? 'The works my Father gives Me to do, they bear witness of Me.' Thirdly, I would put in evidence the witness of my Father: He hath borne witness to Me by an audible voice, which was heard at the time of my baptism. Fourthly, John, who is now lying in the dungeons of Herod's castle, would bear witness of Me; ye did send to him, and he bore witness to the truth." Then the Lord Jesus passes an eulogium upon the Baptist, which is very touching and appreciative: "He was a burning and shining *lamp*."

There is a great distinction between shining and burning: shining is the light-giving, the illuminating that comes forth from the enkindled wick; but it cannot shine unless it burns. The candle that gives light

wastes inch by inch as it gives it. The very wick of your lamp that conducts the oil to the flame chars, and you have to cut it off bit by bit until the longest coil is at length exhausted. We must never forget, that, if we would shine, we must burn. Too many of us want to shine, but we are not prepared to pay the cost that must be faced by every true man that wants to illuminate his time. We must burn down until there is but an eighth of an inch left in the candlestick, till the light flickers a little and drops, makes one more eager effort, and then ceases to shine—"a burning and shining light."

Obviously, then, we have first *the comparison between John and the candle, or lamp;* then we have *the necessary expenditure, burning to shine;* and, thirdly, we have *the misuse that people may make of their opportunities.*

I. THE LORD'S COMPARISON.—"John was a burning and shining lamp." In the original a great contrast is suggested between *lamp,* as it is given in the Revised Version, and *light.* The Old Version put it thus: "He was a burning and shining light"; but the Revised Version puts it thus: "He was a burning and shining lamp": and there is a considerable difference between the two. In the first chapter of the Gospel, the apostle John tells us, speaking of the Baptist, that he was not that light, but was sent to bear witness of that light that all men might believe. "That was the

True Light, which lighteth every man coming into the world."

Jesus Christ is the Light of the World; and I believe that in every age He has been waiting to illumine the hearts and spirits of men, reminding us of the expression in the Book of Proverbs—and it is wonderfully significant—"The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord."

Here is a candle, yonder is the wick; but it gives no light. The air may be full of luminousness, but as yet it has found no point on which to kindle and from which to irradiate. But, see, of a sudden the light gathers to the candle-wick, which had stood helpless and useless, touches it, and it begins to shine with a light not its own. It is borrowed light, caught from some burning cone of flame.

Men are born into the world like so many unlighted candles. They may stand in chaste candlesticks, all of gold or silver, of common tin or porcelain. But all are by nature unlit. On the other hand, Jesus Christ, the Light of men, waits with yearning desire, and, as each successive generation passes across the stage of human life, He is prepared to illumine the spirits which are intended to be the candles of the Lord. In these ages He illumines us with the Gospel; but I believe that all moral intuitions, all instincts of immortality, all cravings after God, all groping in the dark for the true light, all helpful moral revolutions which have swept over mankind, have been the result of his influence,

who, as the true Light, lighteth every man coming into the world. Whenever and wherever a man has flamed up with unusual fervour and spiritual power, with a desire to help his fellows, and has shone like a torch, we must believe that he was illumined by the Son of God, the Wisdom of the Book of Proverbs, whom he may not have known, but whom he would recognize as soon as he crossed the portal of the new Jerusalem. He lighteth every man; He is willing to illumine every man that comes into the world.

This conception casts a considerable light on some of the enigmas of human experience. We have known illiterate, uncultured men, without many gifts of style or grace of speech, yet they have shone to such an extent that every one in their neighbourhood has been lit by the radiance that has streamed from them. On the other hand, we have met men who have passed through a college training and been carefully trained for their life-work; important pulpits and opportunities of great usefulness have been opened to them; but their lives have been a disappointment. Why? Ah, the answer is easy. The former class were as candles, made of ordinary wax, and placed in inconspicuous candle-sticks, which had been ignited by the fire of God through the Holy Spirit; and the latter were like exquisitely prepared candlesticks, the candles in which had never been kindled by the fire of God. There are hundreds of professing Christians, and some may read these pages, who have never really been kindled; who have

never been touched by the Son of God; who do not know what it is to shine with his light and to burn with his fire.

What is the process of lighting? The wick of the candle is simply brought into contact with the flame, and the flame leaps to it, kindles on it, without parting with any of its vigour or heat, and continues to burn, drawing to itself the nourishment which the candle supplies. So let Jesus Christ touch you. Believe in the Light, that you may become a child of the Light. Take off the extinguisher; cast away your prejudice; put off those misconceptions; have done with those unworthy habits: putting them all aside, let Jesus kindle you. "Arise, shine; for thy light is come." "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead; and Christ shall give thee light."

We were kindled, that we might kindle others. I would like, if I might have my choice, to burn steadily down, with no guttering waste, and as I do so to communicate God's fire to as many unlit candles as possible; and to burn on steadily until the socket comes in view, then to light, in the last flicker, twenty, thirty, or a hundred candles at once; so that as one expires they may begin burning and spreading light which shall shine till Jesus comes. Get light from Christ, then share it; and remember that it is the glory of fire that one little candle may go on lighting hundreds of candles—one insignificant taper may light all the lamps of a cathedral church, and yet not be robbed of its own lit-

tle glow of flame. Andrew was lit by Christ Himself, and passed on the flame to Simon Peter, and he to three thousand more on the Day of Pentecost. Each of these spread on the precious flame, as the pilgrims in Jerusalem on Easter Day, who first catch the newly-given fire, and spread it throughout the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, till every torch is ignited. Every Christian soul illumined by the grace of God thus becomes, as John the Baptist was, a lamp. But there is always the same impassable chasm between these and the Lord. They are derived; He is original. They need to be sustained and fed; He is the fountain of Light: because, as the Father hath life in Himself, He hath given to Him also to have life in Himself, and his life is the light of men.

II. The Inevitable Expenditure.—"He was a burning and shining light." *If you would shine, you must burn.* The ambition to shine is universal; but all are not prepared to pay the price by which alone they can acquire the right to give the true light of life. There are plenty of students who would win all the prizes, and wear all the honours, apart from days and nights of toil; but they find it a vain ambition. Before a man can become Senior Wrangler he must have burnt, not only the midnight oil, but some of the very fibre of his soul. Conspicuous positions in the literary and scientific world are less the reward of genius than of laborious, soul-consuming toil. The great chemist will

work sixteen hours out of twenty-four. The illustrious author acquires, by profound research, the materials which he weaves into his brilliant page. Such men shine because they burn.

But this is pre-eminently the principle in the service of Christ. It was so with the Lord Himself. He shone, and his beams have illumined myriads of darkened souls, and shall yet bring dawn throughout the world; but, ah, how He burned! The disciples remembered that it was written of Him: "The zeal of thine House hath consumed Me." He suffered, that He might serve. He would not save Himself, because He was bent on saving others. He ascended to his throne because He spared not Himself from the cruel tree. Pilate marvelled that his death came so soon, and sent for the centurion to be certified that in so few hours He had succumbed. But he did not realize that in three short years He had expended his vital strength so utterly, that there was no reserve to fall back upon. There had been an inward consumption, an exhaustion of nervous power, a wearing down of the springs of vitality. He shone because of the fire that burned within Him.

It was so with the great apostle, who said that he filled up that which was lacking in the afflictions of Christ, not of course that there was any lack in the work of propitiation which required his further help, but that the saints are called to share with their Lord his sorrows for men, his tears, to lift the burdens and crosses of others, to give of their very life-blood for

the replenishing of the exhausted fountains of human faith, and hope, and love. Paul gave freely of his best. He shone because he never hesitated to burn. Remember how he affirmed that he was pressed down, perplexed, pursued, and always bore about in his body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus might be manifested in his mortal flesh. The price paid for the life that wrought in the hearts of his converts was that death should work in himself.

All the saints have passed through similar experiences. They knew, as Cranmer said, that they could never hope to kindle a fire that should never be put out, unless they were prepared to stand steadily at the stake and give their bodies to be burned. But they counted not their lives dear unto them, if they might but finish their course with joy, and the ministry which they had received of Jesus Christ, to testify to the Gospel of his Grace. The men and women who shine as beacon-lights across the centuries are those whose tears were their meat day and night, whose prayers rose with strong cryings and tears; whilst, as with Palissy, the Huguenot potter, the very furniture of the house was brought out to feed the flame in which the precious glaze was being precipitated.

If the Christian worker longs to benefit the poor slum district in which he is located, he must be prepared to live amongst the people and expend himself. Presently, in his hollow cheeks, his sallow complexion, his attenuated form, his diminishing strength, you will see

that he is paying the price for his 100-candle illuminating power, because he is being consumed. Every successful worker for God must learn that lesson. You must be prepared to suffer; you can only help men when you die for them. If you desire to save others you cannot save yourself; you must be prepared to fall into the ground and die if you would not abide alone: there must be with you, as with Paul, the decaying of the outward man, that the inward man may be renewed day by day. You must be prepared to say with him, "Death worketh in us, but life in you."

If you burn, you will shine. The burning and the shining do not always go together; often the burning goes on a long time without much illumination resulting from the expenditure. Those who are rich in gifts and natural endowments cast in much, and the poor cast in all their living; this they continue to do, year after year, and none seems to heed the awful cost at which their testimony is given. Moreover, to use a well-known phrase, the game hardly seems worth the candle. The area they influence is so limited, the souls affected so few, the glimmer of their light, like a street-lamp in a fog, hardly reaches across the street or to the ground. Sometimes it appears only to make the darkness denser and thicker. In many cases, the saints of God have burnt down to the last film of vital energy and expired, and there has been no shining that the world has taken cognisance of. Their bitter complaint has been, "I have laboured in vain; I have spent my

strength for naught, and in vain." But even these shall shine. They shall shine as the stars for ever and ever in that world where all holy and faithful souls obtain their dues.

Let us see to the burning; God will see to the shining. It is ours to feed the sacred heaven-enkindled flame with the daily fuel of the Word of God and holy service; and God will see to it that no ray of power or love is wasted. He will place reflectors around us, to catch up and repeat the influences that proceed from us. "The Lord was with Samuel, and did let none of his words fall to the ground." It is ours to keep in company with the risen Lord, listening to Him as He opens to us the Scriptures, until our hearts burn within us; then, as we hasten to tell what we have seen, tasted, and handled of the Word of Life, there will be a glow on our faces, whether we wist it or not; and men shall say of us: "They have been with Jesus." If we think only of the shining, we shall probably miss both it and the burning. But if we devote ourselves to the burning, even though it involves the hidden work of the mine, the stoke-hole, and the furnace-room, there will be the raying forth of a light that cannot be hid. Where there is the burning heat, there must be the soft, gleaming light. Let there be but summer, and the flowers cover the land.

For the burning and the shining, God will provide the fuel. The fire which burnt in the bush needed no fuel; "the bush was not consumed." With us there

is perpetual need for the nourishment of the fire of love and the light of life by the administration of appropriate fuel. The oil must be supplied to the lamp. The fire cannot be kept burning on the altar apart from the incessant care and attention of the priests. But be of good cheer; He who hath begun a good work will perform it unto the day of Jesus Christ. All grace will be made to abound towards you, that you may have all sufficiency for all things, and abound to every good work. The Lord will give grace and glory; no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly. God will supply all your need, according to his riches in glory, by Christ Jesus. It is especially helpful to ponder the full import of the phrase—"the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ." It is as though we had access to one of those oil-wells of the west, which seem practically inexhaustible.

It is a wonderful thing how often God puts his lighted candles in the cellar. We would have supposed that God would have placed a man like John on a pedestal or a throne, that his influence might reach as far as possible. Instead of that He allowed him to spend the precious months of his brief life in prison. And the lamp flickered somewhat in the pestilential damp. It may be that this is your place also. In the silence of a sick chamber, in the obscurity of some country parish, amid obloquy and hatred, you are doomed to spend your slowly-moving years. It seems such a waste. Loneliness and depression are hard to en-

dure; but the consciousness of accomplishing so little, though at such cost, is very painful. This is your cellar-life, your dungeon experience. Remember that Joseph and Rutherford, John Bunyan and Madame Guyon, have been before you there. Probably, because the cellar is so very dark, God wants to station a candle there, and has placed you there because you can accomplish a work for Him, and for others, of priceless importance. Where is the light needed so much as on a dark landing or a sunken reef? Go on shining, and you will find some day that God will make that cellar a pedestal out of which your light shall stream over the world; for it was out of his prison cell that John illuminated the age in which his lot was cast, quite as much as from his rock-pulpit beside the Jordan. "I would have you know, brethren," said the apostle, "that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the progress of the Gospel, so that my bonds became manifest in Christ throughout the Prætorian guard" (Phil. i. 12, 13, R. V.).

III. CHRIST'S WARNING AGAINST THE MISUSE OF OPPORTUNITIES.—"Ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light." The Greek word rendered *rejoice* has in it the idea of moths playing around a candle, or of children dancing around a torch-light, as it burns lower and lower. It is as though a light were given to men for an hour, for them to use for some high and sacred purpose; but they employ it for danc-

ing and card-playing, instead of girding up their loins to serious tasks. "You were willing," says the Master, in effect, "to rejoice, to dance and sing, in his light. You treated his ministry as a pastime. As long as he spoke with you about the coming kingdom, you listened and were glad; but when he began to call you to repentance and warn you of wrath to come, you left him." He is now like an almost extinguished lamp. His hour is all but done. The brief space he was sent to occupy has been fulfilled. "Behold, the night cometh, when no man can work."

The ministry of the Gospel is but for "an hour." The story of man may be compared to a brief day (1 Cor. iv. 3, *marg.*, R. V.); and in that day the proclamation of the good news from God occupies but a very limited space. The hour-glass was turned when Jesus ascended, and it is more than likely that the last grains are running through; then the cry of the herald shall be hushed, and the servants' voices will be no more heard in the street inviting to the marriage supper, and there shall be none to break or distribute the bread of life.

With what eager care men should prize these fleeting opportunities, not listening to the preacher's voice, as of one that can make a pleasant sound from the harp or organ—not seeking merely the delight of the ear or intellect; but taking heed to hear for eternity, receiving in meek and retentive hearts the precious grain as it falls from the sower's hand, and giving diligence that the best possible results may accrue.

Oh, children of the sunny market-place, playing giddily throughout the long afternoon, take heed lest your opportunities of preparing for the serious work of life slip away unimproved, and you find yourselves face to face with death and judgment without a screen, without hope, and without God. John executed in prison; Jesus nailed to the cross; the apostles and martyrs done to death on the scaffold and at the stake—and the ship drifting on the rocks, without a warning voice to arouse the thoughtless crowd of dice-throwers and dancers to the certainty and nearness of their doom!

XIV

Set at Liberty.

(Mark vi. 27.)

"Hush my soul, and vain regrets be stilled;
Now rest in Him who is the complement
Of whatsoe'er transcends our mortal doom,
Of baffled hope and unfulfilled intent:
In the clear vision and aspect of whom
All longings and all hopes shall be fulfilled."

Archbishop Trench.

THE evangelist Mark tells us, in the twenty-first verse of this chapter, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, and the high captains, and the chief men of Galilee. Now, of course Galilee, over which Herod had jurisdiction, and where, for the most part, he dwelt, in the beautiful city of Tiberias, the ruins of which are still washed by the blue waters of the lake, was a considerable distance from the Castle of Machærus, which, as we have seen, was situated on the desolate region on the eastern side of the Dead Sea. There would probably, therefore, have been a martial and noble procession from Galilee, which followed the course of the Jordan to the oasis of Jericho, and then branched off to the old, grim fortress,

which, like one of those ruined castles on the Rhine, had been for many years the scene of brigandage, pillage, and bloodshed.

It is not difficult to imagine that sumptuous and splendid retinue. Roman soldiers and officials in all the splendour of their accoutrements and mounting; carriages conveying the royal consort, Herodias, Salome, and their ladies; large numbers of native soldiers; swarthy Bedouin and Greek traders, priests and levites, who lived on the smile of the Court; court officials, camp-bearers, a motley following of servants, and slaves. In the front of the cavalcade Herod, on a magnificent steed. The line of march, enlivened by the sound of martial music, and the flaunting of innumerable banners. Slowly they made their way through those desert solitudes, across the pasture-lands, and finally swept up through the little village that lay at the foot of the hill to the castellated fortress which covered the summit, edging its mighty walls to the brink of the steep cliffs. Soon the last straggler would be lost to view, the heavy portcullis fall, and the massive iron gate swing to, and the first step would be taken towards the tragedy, which lay right before Herod's path. One sometimes wonders whether the whole of these circumstances had not been planned by the cunning device of Herodias. In any case, nothing could have been arranged more exactly to suit her murderous schemes.

The days that preceded the celebration of Herod's

birthday were probably filled with merry-makings and carouse. Groups of nobles, knights, and ladies would gather on the terraces, looking out over the Dead Sea, and away to Jerusalem, and in the far distance to the gleaming waters of the Mediterranean. Picnics and excursions would be arranged into the neighbouring country. Archery, jousts, and other sports would beguile the slowly-moving hours. Jests, light laughter, and buffoonery would fill the air. And all the while, in the dungeons beneath the castle, lay that mighty preacher, the confessor, forerunner, herald, and soon to be the martyr.

But this contrast was more than ever accentuated on the evening of Herod's birthday, when the great banqueting-chamber was specially illuminated; the tables decked with flowers and gold and silver plate; laughter and mirth echoing through the vaulted roof from the splendid company that lay, after the Eastern mode, on sumptuous couches, strewing the floor from one end to the other of the spacious hall. Servants, in costly liveries, passed to and fro, bearing the rich dainties on massive salvers, one of which was to be presently besprinkled with the martyr's blood.

In such a scene, I would have you study the genesis of a great crime, because you must remember that in respect to sin, there is very little to choose between the twentieth century and the first; between the sin of that civilization and of ours. This is why the Bible must always command the profound interest of mankind—

because it does not concern itself with the outward circumstances and setting of the scenes and characters it describes, but with those great common facts of temptation, sin, and redemption, which have a meaning for us all.

This chapter is therefore written under more than usual solemnity, because one is so sure that, in dealing with that scene and the passions that met there in a foaming vortex, words may be penned that will help souls which are caught in the drift of the same black current, and are being swept down. Perhaps this page shall utter a warning voice to arrest them, ere it be too late, and be a life-buoy, or rope, or brother's hand reached out to save them as they rush past on the boiling waters. For there is help and grace in God by which a Herod and a Judas, a Jezebel and a Lady Macbeth, a royal criminal or an ordinary one, may be arrested, redeemed, and saved.

In this, as in every sin, there were three forces at work:—First, the predisposition of the soul, which the Bible calls "lust," and "the desire of the mind." "Among whom," says the apostle, "we also all once lived in the lusts of our flesh, doing the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath." Second, the suggestion of evil from without. Finally, the act of the will by which the suggestion was accepted and finally adopted.

It is, in this latter phase, that sin especially comes in. There may be sin in being able and disposed to sin.

The possession of a sinful nature needs the atonement and propitiation of the Precious Blood. There may be sin, also, in dallying with temptation, in not anticipating its advent at a further distance. But, after all, that which is of the essence of sin is in the act of the will, which allows itself to admit and entertain some foul suggestion, and ultimately sends its executioner below to carry its sentence into effect.

I. The Predetermination towards this Sin.—The word "lust" is now universally employed and understood in one direction only. It is a pity and a mistake; because we fail to appreciate many of the warning signals which the Spirit of God stations along our path. Any inordinate desire for sensual and pleasurable excitement, whether fixed on a right object, or directed towards a wrong one, comes under the denomination of "lust." Strong and ill-regulated desire or passion, in whatever direction it expresses itself, will work our ruin, and not that alone of impurity, to which this old word is now specially confined.

In dealing with temptation and sin, we must always take into account the presence in the human heart of that sad relic of the Fall, which biases men towards evil. Every one that has handled bowls on the green is familiar with the effect of the bias. The bowls are not perfect spheres, and are weighted on one side in such a way that, as they leave the hand, they will inevitably turn off from a straight course; and on this

account the greater skill is required from the hands that manipulate and impel them. Such a bias has come to us all: first, from our ancestor Adam; and, secondly, by that law of heredity which has been accumulating its malign and sinister force through all the ages. God alone can compute the respective strength of these forces; but He can, and He will, as each separate soul stands before his judgment bar.

Herod was the son of the great Herod, a voluptuous, murderous tyrant; and, from some source or other, he had inherited a very weak nature. Perhaps, if he had come under strong, wholesome influences, he would have lived a passably good life; but it was his misfortune to fall under the influence of a beautiful fiend, who became his Lady Macbeth, his Jezebel, and wrought the ruin of his soul. It is a remarkable thing, how strong an influence a beautiful and unscrupulous woman may have over a weak man. And for this reason, amongst others, weakness becomes wickedness. The man who allows himself to drift weakly before the strongest influence is almost certain to discover that, in this world, the strongest influences are those which make for sin; these touch him most closely, and operate most continuously, and find in his nature the best *nidus,* or nest, in which to breed.

The influences that suggest and make for sin in this world are so persistent—at every street corner, in every daily newspaper, among every gathering of well-dressed people, or ill—that if my readers have no other

failing than that they are weak, I am bound to warn them, in God's name, that unless they succeed in some way, directly or indirectly, in linking themselves to the strength of the Son of God, they will inevitably become wicked. Remember that the men, and especially the women, who are filling our gaols as criminals, were, in most cases, only weak, but they therefore drifted before the strong, black current which flows through the world, and have become objects against whom all parents warn their children. With all my soul—and I have had no small experience of myself and of others—I implore that if you are conscious of your weakness, you shall do what the sea-anemone and the limpet do, which cling to the rock when the storms darken the sky. "Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might."

Herod was reluctant to take the course to which his evil genius urged him. He made a slight show of resistance, as we have seen—but he did not break with her; and so she finally had her way, and dragged him to her lowest level. Here was the cause of his ruin, as it may be of yours. You, too, have become allied with one who is possessed by a more imperious will, and dominated by a stronger passion, than yours. You suppose, however, that you can act as a make-weight, a drag on the chariot-wheel; that you will be able to keep and steady the pace; and that, when you like, you may arrest the onward progress. Ah, it is not so! Herodias will have her way with you. You may be re-

luctant, will falter and hesitate, will remonstrate, will resist, but ultimately you will drift into doing the very sins, the mention of which in your presence brings the red blood to your face.

Beware of yourself. If you are so impressionable to John the Baptist, remember that you may be equally so to evil suggestion: take heed, therefore, to guard against anything in your life that may open the gates of your sensitive nature to a temptation, which you may not be able to withstand. If you are weak in physical health, you guard against draught and fatigue, against impure atmosphere and contagion—how much more should you guard against the scenes and company which may act prejudically on the health of your soul? Of all our hours, none are so fraught with danger as those of recreation. In these we cast ourselves, with the majority of Gideon's men, on the bank of the stream, with relaxed girdles, drinking at our ease, without a thought of the proximity of the foe; and, therefore, in these we are more likely to fall. The Christian soldier is never off duty, never out of the enemy's reach, never at liberty to relax his watch. The sentries must always be posted, and the pickets kept well out on the veldt.

It was the most perilous thing that Herod could do, to have that banquet. Lying back on his divan, lolling on his cushions, eating his rich food, quaffing the sparkling wine, exchanging repartee with his obsequious followers, it was as though the petals and calyx of

his soul were all open to receive the first insidious spore of evil that might float past on the sultry air. That is why some of us dare not enter the theatre, or encourage others to enter. This is not the place to enter into a full discussion of the subject; but, even when a play may be deemed inoffensive and harmless, the sensuous attractions of the place, the glitter, the music, the slightly-dressed figures of the actors and actresses, the entire atmosphere and environment, which appeal so strongly to the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life, break down some of the fortifications, which would otherwise resist the first incidence and assault of evil. The air of the theatre, the ball-room, the race-course, seem so impregnated with the nocuous germs and microbes of evil, that it is perilous for the soul to expose itself to them, conscious as it is of predisposing bias and weakness. It is this consciousness, also, which prompts the daily prayer, "Lead us not into temptation."

II. Temptation.—In the genesis of a sin we must give due weight to the power of the Tempter, whether by his direct suggestion to the soul or by the instrumentality of men and women whom he uses for his fell purpose. In this case Satan's accomplice was the beautiful Herodias—beautiful as a snake, but as deadly. She knew the influence that John the Baptist wielded over her weak paramour, that he was accustomed to attach unmeasured importance to his words, and do

"many things." She realized that his conscience was uneasy, and therefore the more liable to be affected by his words when he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come. She feared for the consequences if the Baptist and Herod's conscience should make common cause against her. What if her power over the capricious tyrant were to begin to wane, and the Baptist gain more and more influence, to her discredit and undoing? She was not safe so long as John the Baptist breathed. Herod feared him, and perhaps she feared him with more abject terror, and was bent on delivering her life of his presence.

She watched her opportunity, and it came on the occasion we have described. The ungodly revel was at its height. Such a banquet as Herod had often witnessed in the shameless court of Tiberius, and in which luxury and appetite reached their climax, was in midcurrent. The strong wines of Messina and Cyprus had already done their work. The hall resounded with ribald joke and merriment. Towards the end of such a feast it was the custom for immodest women to be introduced, who, by their gestures, imitated scenes in certain well-known mythologies, and still further inflamed the passions of the banqueters. But instead of the usual troupe, which Herod probably kept for such an occasion, Salome herself came in and danced a wild nautch-dance. What shall we think of a mother who could expose her daughter to such a scene, and suggest her taking a part in the half-drunken orgy? To

what depths will not mad jealousy and passion urge us, apart from the restraining grace of God! The girl, alas, was as shameless as her mother.

She pleased Herod, who was excited with the meeting of the two strong passions, which have destroyed more victims than have fallen on all the battlefields of the world; and in his frenzy, he promised to give her whatever she might ask, though it were to cost half his kingdom. She rushed back to her mother with the story of her success. "What shall I ask?" she cried. The mother had, perhaps, anticipated such a moment as this, and had her answer ready. "Ask," she replied instantly, "for John the Baptist's head." Back from her mother she tripped into the banqueting-hall, her black eyes flashing with cruel hate, lighted from her mother's fierceness. A dead silence fell on the buzz of conversation, and every ear strained for her reply. "And she came in straightway with haste unto the king, and asked, saying, I will that thou forthwith give me in a charger the head of John the Baptist."

Mark that word, "forthwith." Her mother and she were probably fearful that the king's mood would change. What was to be done must be done at once, or it might not be done at all. "Quick, quick," the girl seemed to say, "the moments seem like hours; now, in this instant, give me what I demand. I want my banquet, too; let it be served up on one of these golden chargers." The imperious demand of the girl showed how keenly she had entered into her mother's scheme

It is thus that suggestions come to us; and, so far as I can undertand, we may expect them to come so long as we are in this world. There seems to be a precise analogy between temptation and the microbes of disease. These are always in the air; but when we are in good health they are absolutely innocuous, our nature offers no hold or resting place for them. The grouse disease only makes headway when there has been a wet season, and the young birds are too weakened by the damp to resist its attack. The potato blight is always lying in wait, till the potato plants are deteriorated by a long spell of rain and damp; it is only then that it can effect its fell purpose. The microbes of consumption and cancer are probably never far away from us, but are powerless to hurt us, till our system has become weakened by other causes. So temptation would have no power over us, if we were in full vigour of soul. It is only when the vitality of the inward man is impaired, that we are unable to withstand the fiery darts of the wicked one.

This shows how greatly we need to be filled with the life of the Son of God. In his life and death, our Lord, in our human nature, met and vanquished the power of sin and death; He bore that nature into the heavenly places, whence He waits to impart it, by the Holy Spirit, to those who are united with Him by a living faith. Is not this what the apostle John meant, when he said that his converts—his little children—could overcome, because greater was He that was in them

than he that was in the world? He who has the greatest and strongest nature within him must overcome an inferior nature; and if you have the victorious nature of the living Christ in you, you must be stronger than the nature which He bruised beneath his feet.

III. The Consent of the Will.—"The king was exceeding sorry." The girl's request sobered him. His face turned pale, and he clutched convulsively at the cushion on which he reclined. On the one hand, his better nature revolted from the deed, and he was more than fearful of the consequences; on the other, he said to himself, "I am bound by my oath. I have sworn; and my words were spoken in the audience of so many of my chief men, I dare not go back, lest they lose faith in me." "And straightway the king sent forth a soldier of his guard and commanded to bring the Baptist's head."

Is it not marvellous that a man who did not refrain from doing deeds of incest and murder, should be so scrupulous about violating an oath that ought never to have been sworn? You have thought that you were bound to go through with your engagement, because you had pledged yourself, although you know that it would condemn you to lifelong misery and disobedience to the law of Christ. But stay for a moment, and tell me! What was your state of mind when you pledged your word? Were you not under the influence of passion? Did you not form your plan in the twilight of

misinformation, or beneath the spell of some malign and unholy influence, that exerted a mesmeric power over you? Looking back on it, can you not see that you ought never to have bound yourself, and do you not feel that if you had your time again you would not bind yourself? Then be sure that you are not bound by that "dead hand." You must act in the clearer, better light, which God has communicated. Even though you called on the sacred name of God, God cannot sanction that which you now count mistaken, and wrong. You had no right to pledge half the kingdom of your nature. It is not yours to give, it is God's. And if you have pledged it, through mistake, prejudice, or passion, dare to believe that you are absolved from your vow, through repentance and faith, and that the breach is better than the observance.

"And he went and beheaded John in prison." Had the Baptist heard aught of the unseemly revelry? Had any strain of music been wafted down to him? Perhaps so. Those old castles are full of strange echoes. His cell was perfectly dark. He might be lying bound on the bare ground, or some poor bed of straw. Was his mind glancing back on those never-to-be-forgotten days, when the heaven was opened above him, and he saw the descending Dove? Was he wondering why he was allowed to lie there month after month, silenced and suffering? Ah, he did not know how near he was to liberty!

There was a tread along the corridor. It stopped

outside his cell. The light gleamed under the door; the heavy wards of the lock were turned: in a moment more he saw the gleam of the naked sword, and guessed the soldier's errand. There was no time to spare; the royal message was urgent. Perhaps one last message was sent to his disciples; then he bowed his head before the stroke; the body fell helpless here, the head there, and the spirit was free, with the freedom of the sons of God, in a world where such as he stand among their peers. Forerunner of the Bridegroom here, he was his forerunner there also; and the Bridegroom's friend passed homeward to await the Bridegroom's coming, where he ever hears the voice he loves.

"And the soldier brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the damsel; and the damsel gave it to her mother." There would not be so much talking while the tragedy was being consummated. The king and courtiers must have been troubled under the spell of that horror, as Belshazzar when the hand wrote in characters of mystery, over against the sacred candlestick. And when the soldier entered, carrying in the charger that ghastly burden, they beheld a sight which was to haunt some of them to their dying day. Often Herod would see it in his dreams, and amid the light of setting suns. It would haunt him, and fill his days and nights with anguish that all the witchery of Herodias could not dispel.

Months afterwards, when he heard of Jesus, the conscience-stricken monarch said: "It is John the Bap-

tist, whom I beheaded; he is risen from the dead." And still afterwards, when Jesus Himself stood before him, and refused to speak one word, he must have associated that silence and his deed together, as having a fatal and necessary connection.

So the will, which had long faltered with the temptress, at last took the fatal step, and perpetrated the crime which could never be undone. There is always a space given, during which a tempted soul is allowed time to withdraw from the meshes of the net of temptation. Sudden falls have always been preceded by long dallying with Delilah. The crashing of the tree to the earth has been prepared for by the ravages of the borer-worm, which has eaten out its heart.

If you have taken the fatal step, and marred your life by some sad and disastrous sin, dare to believe that there is forgiveness for you with God. Men may not forgive, but God will. As far as the east is from the west, so far will He remove our transgressions from us. Perhaps we can never again take up public Christian work; but we may walk humbly and prayerfully with God, sure that we are accepted of Him, and forgiven, though we can hardly forgive ourselves.

But if we have not yet come to this, let us devoutly thank God, and be on the watch against any influences that may drift us thither. We may yet retreat. We may yet disentangle ourselves. We may yet receive into our natures the living power of the Lord Jesus. We may yet cut off the right hand and right foot, and

pluck out the right eye, which is causing us to offend. Better this, and go into life maimed, than be cast, as Herod was, to the fire and worm of unquenchable remorse.

XV

The Grave of John, and Another Grave.

(Matthew xiv. 12.)

"When some beloved voice that was to you
Both sound and sweetness, faileth suddenly,
And silence, against which you dare not cry,
Aches round you like a strong disease and new,—
What hopes, what help, what music will undo
That silence to your sense? Not friendship's sigh,
Not reason's subtle count. . . . Nay, none of these!
Speak, thou availing Christ!—and fill this pause."

E. B. Browning.

WE have beheld the ghastly deed with which Herod's feast ended—the golden charger, on which lay the freshly-dissevered head of the Baptist, borne by Salome to her mother, that the two might gloat on it together. Josephus says that the body was cast over the castle wall, and lay for a time unburied. Whether that were so, we cannot tell; but, in some way, John's disciples heard of the ghastly tragedy, which had closed their master's life, and they came to the precincts of the castle to gather it up as it lay dishonoured on the ground, or ventured into the very jaws of death to request that it might be given to them. In either case, it was a brave thing for them

to do; an altogether heroic exploit, which may be classed in the same category with that of the men of Jabesh-Gilead, who travelled all night through the country infested by the Philistines to rescue the bodies of Saul and his sons from the temple of Bethshan.

The headless body was then borne to a grave, either in the grim, gaunt hills of Moab, or in that little village, away on the southern slopes of the Judæan hills, where, some thirty years before, the aged pair had rejoiced over the growing lad. God knows where that grave lies; and some day it will yield up to honour and glory the body which was sown in weakness and corruption.

Having performed the last sad rites, the disciples "went and told Jesus." Every mourner should go along the path they trod, to the same gentle and tender Comforter; and if any who read these words have placed within the narrow confines of a grave the precious remains of those dearer than life, let them follow where John's disciples have preceded them, to the one Heart of all others in the universe which is able to sympathize and help; because it also has sorrowed unto tears at the grave of its beloved, even though it throbbed with the fulness of the mighty God. Go, and tell Jesus!

The telling will bring relief. Though the great High-Priest knows all the story, He loves to hear it told, because of the relief which the recital necessarily imparts to the surcharged soul. He will tell you that

your brother shall rise again; that your child is safe in the flowery meadows of Paradise; that those whom you have loved and lost are engaged in high service amid the ministries of eternity; that every time-beat is bringing nearer the moment of inseparable union.

It is not, however, on these details that we desire to dwell, but to use the scenes before us as a background and contrast to magnify certain features in the death, grave, and abiding influence of Jesus of Nazareth.

I. Contrast the Death of John and that of Jesus.—There were many points of similarity between their careers. These two rivers sprang from the same source, in a quiet glen far up among the hills; lay in deep lagoons during their earlier course; leapt down in the same mighty torrent when their time had come; and for the first few miles watered the same tract of country.

It would be possible to enumerate a large number of identical facts of the life-courses of the two cousins. Their births were announced, and their ministries anticipated, under very special circumstances; Mary was unmarried, and Elisabeth past age—and an angel of the Lord came to each. John seemed, to the superficial view, the stronger and mightier of the two; but Jesus followed close behind and took up a similar burden, as He bade the people repent and believe the Gospel. They were alike in attending no prophetic school, and avoiding each of the great Jewish sects. Neither Hillel

nor Shammai could claim them. They had no ecclesiastical connections; they stood aloof from the Pharisees and Sadducees, the Herodians and Essenes. They attracted similar atttention, gathered the same crowds, and protested against the same sins. Rearing the same standard, they summoned men from formality and hypocrisy to righteousness and reality. They incurred the same hatred on the part of the religious leaders of their nation, and suffered violent deaths—the one beneath the headsman's axe in the dungeons of Herod's castle; the other on the Cross, at the hand of Pilate and the Roman soldiers. Each suffered a death of violence at the hand of men whom he had lived to succour; each died when the life-blood throbbed with young manhood's prime, and while there was sweet fragrance as of early summer; each was loved and mourned by a little handful of devoted followers. But there the similarity ends, and the contrast begins. With John, it was the tragic close of a great and epoch-making career. When he died men said—Alas! a prophet's voice is silenced. What a pity that in a moment of passion the tyrant took his life! Let him sleep! Rest will be sweet to one who expended his young strength with such spendthrift extravagance! Such men are rare!. Ages flower thus but once, and then years of barrenness!

But as we turn to the death of Jesus, other feelings than those of pity or regret master us. We are neither surprised, nor altogether sorry. We do not recognise

that there is in any sense an end of his work—rather it is the beginning. The corn of wheat has fallen into the ground to die, that it may not abide alone, but bear much fruit. Here, at the Cross, is the head of waters, rising from unknown depths, which are to heal the nations; here the sacrifice is being offered which is to expiate the sin of man, and bring peace to myriads of penitents; here the last Adam at the tree undoes the deadly work wrought by the first at another tree. This is no mere martyr's last agony; but a sacrifice, premeditated, prearranged, the effects of which have already been prevalent in securing the remission of sins done aforetime. This is an event which millenniums have been preparing, and to which millenniums shall look back. John's death affected no destiny but his own; the death of Jesus has affected the destiny of our race. As his forerunner explained, He was the Lamb of God who bore away the sin of the world. The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

But there is another contrast. In the case of John, the martyr had no control on his destiny; he could not order the course of events; there was no alternative but to submit. When he opened his ministry, he had no thought that such a fate would befall. As he stood boldly forth upon his rock-hewn pulpit, and preached to the eager crowds, do you suppose that the idea ever flashed across his mind that his path, carpeted with flowers and lined on either side with applause, could end in the loneliness of a desert track, lying

across a barren waste where no man dwelt or came, and where the vast expanse engulphs the last cry of the perishing? But, from the first, Jesus meant to die. If, eight centuries ago, you had seen the first, outlines drawn of the Cologne Cathedral, whose noble structure has been brought to completion within only the last decades, you would have been convinced that the completed fabric would enclose a cross; so the life of Jesus, from the earliest, portended Calvary. He had received power and commandment from the Father to lay down his life. For this cause He was born, and for this He came into the world. Others die because they have been born: Jesus was born that He might die.

In his great picture of the Carpenter's shop, Millais depicts the shadow of the Cross, flung back by the growing lad, on the wall, strongly-defined in the clear oriental light. Mary beholds it with a look of horror on her face. The thought is a true one. From the earliest, the Cross cast its shadow over the life of the Son of Man. He was never deceived as to his ultimate destiny. He told Nicodemus that He must be lifted up. He knew that as the Good Shepherd He would have to give his life for the sheep. He assured his disciples that He would be delivered up to the chief priests and scribes, who would condemn Him to death, crucify, and slay. Man does not need primarily the teacher, the example, nor the miracle-worker; but the Saviour who can stand in his stead, and put away his sin by the sacrifice of Himself. When the soul is bur-

dened with the weight of its sins, and the conscience is ill at ease, whither can we turn save to the Cross, on which the Prince of Glory died!

What answer and explanation can be given to account for the marvellous spell that the Cross of Christ exerts over the hearts of men? You cannot trace it to the influence of early association merely, or to the effect of heredity, or to the fact of our having come of generations which have turned to the green hill far away, in life and death; because if you take the preaching of the Cross to savage and heathen tribes, who have no advantage of Christian centuries behind them, whenever you begin to explain its significance, the sob of the soul is hushed, and its dread dissipated. Tears of anguish are changed into tears of penitence. The shuttles of a new hope begin to weave the garments of a new purity. No other death affects us thus or effects so immediate a transformation. And may not this be cited as the proof that the death of Jesus is unique; the supreme act of love; the gift of that Father-heart which knew the need of the world, and the only way of appeasing it?

II. Contrast the Grave of John and that of Jesus.—Men have alleged that the Lord did not really rise from the dead, and that the tale of his resurrection, if it were not a fabrication, was the elaboration of a myth. But neither of these alternatives will bear investigation. On the one hand, it is absurd to suppose

that the temple of truth could be erected on the quagmire and morass of falsehood—impossible to believe that the one system in the world of mind which has attracted the true to its allegiance, and been the stimulus of truth-seeking throughout the ages, can have originated in a tissue of deliberate falsehoods. On the other hand, it is a demonstrated impossibility that a myth could have found time to grow into the appearance of substantial fact during the short interval which elapsed between the death of Christ and the first historical traces of the Church.

In this connection, it is interesting to consider one sentence dropped by the sacred chronicler. He tells us, that when Herod heard of the works of Jesus, he said immediately, "It is John the Baptist—he is risen from the dead." Herod could not believe that that mighty personality was quenched, even for this life, by that one blow of the executor's sword. Surely he had risen! There was a feverish dread that he would yet be confronted by the murdered man, whose face haunted his dreams. His courtiers, ready to take the monarch's cue, would be equally credulous. From one to another the surmise would pass—"John the Baptist is risen from the dead."

Why, then, did that myth not spread, until it became universally accredited? Ah, there was no chance of such a thing, for the simple reason that there was the grave of John the Baptist to disprove it. If Herod had seriously believed it, or the disciples of John attempted

to spread it, nothing would have been easier than to exhume the body from its sepulture, and produce the ghastly but indubitable refutation of the royal delusion.

When the statement began to spread and gain credence that Christ had risen from the dead; when Peter and John stood up and affirmed that He was living at the right hand of God; if it had been a mere surmise, the fond delusion of loyal and faithful hearts, an hallucination of two or three hysterical women—would it not have been easy for the enemies of Christianity to go forthwith to the grave in the garden of Joseph, and produce the body of the Crucified, with the marks of the nails in hands and feet? Why did they not do it? If it be said that it could not be produced, because it had been taken away, let this further question be answered: Who had taken it away? Not his friends; for they would have taken the cerements and wrappings with which Joseph and Nicodemus had enswathed it. Not His enemies, for they would have been only too glad to produce it. What glee in the grim faces of Caiaphas and Annas, if at the meeting of the Sanhedrim, called to deal with the new heresy, there could have been given some irrefragable proof that the body of Jesus was still sepulchred, if not in Joseph's tomb, yet somewhere else, to which their emissaries had conveyed it!

It is difficult to exaggerate the significance and force of this contrast. And the devout soul cannot but de-

rive comfort from comparing the allegation of the superstitious king, which could have been so easily refuted by the production of the Baptist's body, with that of the disciples, which was confirmed and attested by the condition of the grave which, in spite of the watch and ward of the Roman soldiers, had been despoiled of its prey on the morning of the third day. Herod expected John to rise, and gave his royal authority to the rumour of his resurrection; but it fell to the ground still-born. The disciples did not expect Jesus to rise. They stoutly held that the women were mistaken, when they brought to them the assurance that it was even so. But as the hours passed, the tidings of the empty grave were corroborated by the vision of the Risen Lord, and they were convinced that He who was crucified in weakness was living by the power of God. There could, henceforth, be no hesitation in their message to the world. "The God of our fathers hath glorified his Son Jesus, whom ye denied in the presence of Pilate, when He was determined to let Him go. . . . But ye killed the Prince of Life, whom God raised from the dead." Thank God, we have not followed cunningly-devised fables. "Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first-fruits of them that slept. And as by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead."

III. The Contrast between the Effects of their two Deaths on the Followers of John the Bap-

THAT AND OF JESUS RESPECTIVELY.—What a picture for an artist of sacred subjects is presented by the performance of the last rites to the remains of the great Forerunner! There was probably neither a Joseph nor a Nicodemus among his disciples; certainly no Madgalene nor mother. Devout men bore him to his grave, and made great lamentation over him. He had taught them to pray, to know God, to prepare for the kingdom of God. They had fasted oft also beneath his suggestion; but they were destined to experience what fasting meant, after a new fashion, now that their leader was taken away from them.

The little band broke up at his grave. Farewell! they said to him; farewell to their ministry and mission; farewell to one another. "I go back to my boats and fishing-nets," said one; and "I to my farm," said another; and "We shall go and join Jesus of Nazareth," said the rest. "Good-bye!" "Good-bye!" And so the little band separated, never to meet in a common corporate existence again.

When Jesus lay in his grave, this process of disintegration began at once among his followers also. The women went to embalm Him; the men were apart. Peter and John broke off together—at least they ran together to the sepulchre, but where were the rest? Two walked to Emmaus apart; whilst Thomas was not with them when Jesus came on the evening of Easter Day. As soon as the breath leaves the body disintegration begins; and, when Jesus was dead, as they

supposed, the same process began to show itself. Soon Peter would have been back in Gennesaret; Nathanael beneath his fig-tree; Luke in his dispensary; and Matthew at his toll-booth.

What arrested that process and made it impossible? Why did the day, which began with a certain amount of separation and decay, end with a closer consolidation than ever, so that they were, for the most part, gathered in the upper room; and forty days after they were all with one accord in one place? Why was it that they who had been like timid deer, before He died, became as lions against the storm of Pharisaic hate, and stronger as the weeks passed?

There is only one answer to these questions. The followers of Jesus were convinced by irrefragable proofs that their Master was living at the right hand of power; nay, that He was with them all the days—nearer them than ever before, as much their Head and Leader as at any previous moment. When the shepherd is smitten, the flock is scattered; and this flock was not scattered because the Shepherd had recovered from his mortal wound, and was alive for evermore.

And surely the evidence which sufficed for them is enough for us. Again and again, in dark hours, when I have longed to have the demonstration of sense added to that of faith, it has been an untold comfort to feel that sufficient evidence was given to the Lord's disciples to persuade them against their contrary ex-

pectations and unbelief; to hold them together in spite of every possible inducement to disperse; and to transform a number of units into the Church, against which the gates of hell have not been able to prevail. If they were convinced, we may be. If their eyes beheld and their hands touched the body of the risen Lord, we may be of good cheer. Their behaviour proves that they were thoroughly convinced. They acted as only those can act whose feet are on a rock. They knew whom they had believed; and they had no doubt that He would perfect the work which He had begun. What He had begun in the flesh, He would perfect in the Spirit.

In after days Peter spoke of Him as the Prince, or File-leader of Life; and suggests the conception, that through all the ages He is marching on through the gates of death and the grave, unlocking them for us, and opening the pathway into the realms of more and more abundant life. Let us follow Him. It is not for us to linger around the grave: even John's disciples forbore to do this. But let us join ourselves by faith with our Prince and Leader, our Head and Captain, as He waits to succour us from the excellent glory, sure that where He is, we too shall be; but in the meanwhile we are assured that He is not in the grave, where loving hands laid Him, but risen, ascended, glorified—our Emmanuel, our Bridegroom, our Love and Life. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not

want: . . . He leadeth me; . . . He maketh me to lie down; . . . He restoreth my soul. . . . Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, . . . Thou *art* with me."

XVI

Yet Speaking.

(John x. 40–42.)

"Shine Thou upon us, Lord,
True light of men, to-day;
And through the written Word
Thy very self display;
That so from hearts which burn
With gazing on Thy face,
Thy little ones may learn
The wonders of Thy grace.

J. Ellerton.

BEYOND Jordan!" To the Jews that dwelt at Jerusalem that was banishment indeed. The tract of country beyond Jordan was known as Perea, and was very sparsely populated. There were some tracts of fertile country, dotted by a few scattered villages, but no one of repute lived there; and the refinement, religious advantages, and social life of the metropolis, were altogether absent. Perea was to Jerusalem what the Highlands, a century ago, were to Edinburgh. There our Lord spent the last few months of his chequered career.

But why? Why did the Son of Man banish Himself from the city He loved so dearly? Surely the

home at Bethany would have welcomed Him? Or, failing this, for any reason over which the sisters had no control, He might have found a temporary home at Nazareth, where He had been brought up; or Capernaum, in which He had wrought so many of his mighty works, might have provided Him a palace, whose white marble steps would have been lapped by the blue waters of the lake! Not so! The Son of Man had not where to lay his head. The nation, whose white flower He was, had rejected Him; and the world, for which He came to shed his blood, knew Him not. The religious leaders of the age were pursuing Him with relentless malice, and would have taken his life before the predestined hour had arrived, had He not escaped from their hands, and gone away "beyond Jordan into the place where John was at the first baptizing; and there He abode: and many came unto Him."

There was a peculiar fascination to the Lord Jesus in those solitudes, because of their connection with the Forerunner. Those desert solitudes had been black with crowds of men. Those hill-slopes had been covered with booths and tents, in which the mighty congregations tabernacled, whilst they waited on his words. Those banks had witnessed the baptism of thousands of people, who, in the symbolic act of baptism, had put away their sins. And the villagers, who lived around, could tell wonderful tales of the radiant opening of that brief but epoch-making ministry; they could speak for hours together about the habits of the

austere preacher, and the marvellous power of his eloquence.

As Jesus and his disciples wandered from place to place, Andrew would indicate the spot where he was baptized; and John and he would recall together the place where they were standing when their great teacher and master pointed to Jesus as He walked, and said, "Behold the Lamb of God." Bartholomew would find again the spot where Jesus accosted him as the guileless Israelite, a salutation for which also he had been prepared by the preaching of the Forerunner. Two or three could localize the scene where the deputation from the Sanhedrim accosted the Baptist with the enquiry, "Who art thou?"

It was as though, years after the Battle of Waterloo, some soldiers of the Iron Duke had visited the historic cornfields, and had recited their reminiscences of the memorable incidents of that memorable fight. Here the long, thin red line stood during the whole day. There Napoleon waited to see the effect of the last charge of his cavalry. Yonder, through the wood, Blucher's troops hurried to reinforce their brothers in arms. And down those slopes the old Guard broke with a cheer, as the Duke gave the long-looked-for word. It was in some such spirit that our Lord and his apostles revisited those scenes, where many of them had seen the gate of heaven opened for the first time.

Probably our Lord would resume his ministry of preaching the good tidings. He could not be in any

place where the sins and sorrows of men called for his gracious words, without speaking them; and to Him they probably brought the lame, the blind, the sick, and paralyzed—and He healed them all. Many came to Him, and went away blessed and helped. So much so, that the people could not help contrasting the two ministries. There was a touch of disparagement in their comments on the Baptist's ministry. "They said, John indeed did no miracle." No lame man had leaped as an hart; the tongue of no dumb man had sung; no widow had received her son raised to life from his hands; no leper's flesh had come to him, as the flesh of a little child. It was quite true—John had done no miracle.

But with this slight disparagement, there was a generous tribute and acknowledgment. "But all things whatsoever John spake of this Man were true." He said that He was the Lamb of God, pure and gentle, holy, harmless, and undefiled; *and it was true.* He said that He would use his fan, separating the wheat from the chaff; *and it was true.* He said that He would baptize with fire; *and it was true.* He said that He was the Bridegroom of Israel; *and it was true.* He did no miracle, but he spoke strong, true words of Jesus, and they have been abundantly verified. And these simple-hearted people of Perea did what the Pharisees and scribes, with all their fancied wisdom, had failed to do: they put the words of the Baptist and the life of Jesus together, and reasoned that since this

had fitted those, as a key fits the lock, therefore Jesus was indeed the Son of God and the King of Israel; and "many believed on Him there."

I. Life without Miracles.—The people were inclined to disparage the life of John because there was no miracle in it. But surely his whole life was a miracle; from first to last it vibrated with Divine power. And did he work no miracle? If he did not open the eyes of the blind, did not multitudes, beneath his words, come to see themselves sinners, and the world a passing show, and the Eternal as alone enduring and desirable? If he did not lay his priestly hand on leprous flesh, as Jesus did, did not many a moral leper go from the waters of his baptism, with new resolves and purposes, to sin no more? If he did not raise dead bodies, did not many, who were immured in the graves of pride, and lust, and worldliness, hear his voice, and come forth to the life—which is life indeed? No miracles! Surely his life was one long pathway of miracle, from the time of his birth of aged parents, to the last moment of his protest against the crimes of Herod!

This is still the mistake of men. They allege that the age of miracles has passed. If they admit that such prodigies may possibly have happened once, but they insist that the world has grown out of them, and that with its arrival at maturity the race has put them away as childish things. God, they think, is either

Absentee, or the Creature of Laws, which He established, and which now hold Him, as the graveclothes held Lazarus. No miracles! But, last summer He made the handfuls of grain, which the farmers cast on the fields, suffice to feed all the population of the globe —as easily as He made five barley loaves provide a full meal for more than ten thousand persons. No miracles! But last autumn, in ten thousand vineyards, He turned the dews of the night and the showers of the morning into the wine that rejoices man's heart; as once, in Cana, He changed the water drawn from the stone jars into the blushing wine. No miracles! Explain, then, why it is, that though ice is of denser specific gravity than water, it does not sink to the bottom of rivers and ponds, by which they would be speedily transformed into masses of ice, but floats on the surface of the water, affording a pathway across from bank to brae, as Jesus once walked on the water from the shores of the Lake of Galilee? No miracles! It was only yesterday that He cleansed a leper; and healed a sin-sick soul; and raised from his bier a young man dead in trespasses and sins; and took a maiden by the hand, saying, Talitha cumi, "Maid, arise!" As I passed by, I saw Him strike a rock, and torrents of tears gushed out: I beheld a tree, with its sacred burden, and the serpent-poison ceased to inflame: I saw the iron swim against its natural bent, and the lion crouch as though it beheld an angel of God with a flaming sword. Again, the seas made a passage for

the Sacramental hosts, and the waters shrank away before the touch of the Priestly feet, making a passage through the depths. No; it is still the age of miracles.

Let us not disparage the age in which we live. To look back on the Day of Pentecost with a sigh, as though there were more of the Holy Spirit on that day than to-day; and as though there were a larger Presence of God in the upper room than in the room in which you sit, is a distinct mistake and folly. We may not have the sound as of a rushing mighty wind, nor the crowns of fire; there is no miracle to startle and arrest: but the Holy Spirit is with the Church in all the old gracious and copious plenitude; the river is sweeping past in undiminished fulness; though there may not be the flash of the electric spark, the atmosphere is as heavily charged as ever with the presence and power of the Divine Paraclete. The Lord said of the Baptist—though he wrought no miracle—that he was the greatest of those born of woman; and perchance He is pronouncing that this age is greater than all preceding ages in its possibilities. In His view, it may be that greater deeds may be attempted and accomplished by the Church of to-day than ever in that past age, when she grappled with and vanquished the whole force of Paganism.

If there is any failure, it is with ourselves. We have not believed in the mighty power and presence of God, because we have missed the outward and visible sign of his working. We have thought that He was not

here, because He has not been in the fire, the earthquake, or the mighty wind which rends the mountains. We have become so accustomed to associate the startling and spectacular with the Divine, that we fail to discover God, when the heaven is begemmed with stars, and the earth carpeted with flowers: as though the lightning were more to us than starlight, and the destructive than the peaceful and patient constructive forces, which are ever at work building up and repairing the fabric of the universe.

Do not look back on the Incarnation, or forward to the Second Advent, as though there were more of God in either one or the other than is within our reach. God is; God is here; God is indivisible: all of God is present at any given point of time or place. He may choose to manifest Himself in outward signs, which impress the imagination more at one time than another; the faith of the Church may be quicker to apprehend and receive in one century than the next: but all time is great—every age is equally his workmanship, and equally full of his wonder-working power. Alas for us, that our eyes are holden!

Let us not disparage the ordinary and commonplace. We are all taught to run after the startling and extraordinary—the statesman who accomplishes the *coup d'état;* the painter who covers a large canvas with a view to scenic effects; the preacher who indulges in superficial and showy rhetoric; the musician whose execution is brilliant and astonishing. We like mira-

cles! Whatever appeals to our love for the sensational and unexpected is likely enough to displace our appreciation of the simple and ordinary. When the sun is eclipsed, we all look heavenward; but the golden summer days may be filled with sunlight, which is dismissed with a commonplace remark about the weather. A whole city will turn out to see the illuminations, whilst the stars hardly attract a passing notice. Let there be a show of curiously-shaped orchids, and society is stirred; but who will travel far to see a woodland glade blue with wild hyacinths, or a meadow-lawn besprent with daisies. Thus our tastes are vitiated and blinded.

It is good to cultivate simple tastes. The pure and childlike heart will find unspeakable enjoyment in all that God has made, though it be as familiar as a lawn sparkling with dewdrops, a hay-field scented by clover-blooms, a streamlet murmuring over the pebbles, or the drawl of the shingle after a retreating wave. It is a symptom of a weak and unstable nature to be always in search for some new thing, for some greater sensation, for some more startling sign. "Show us a sign from heaven," is the incessant cry of the Pharisee and Scribe: and when the appetite has been once created, it can never be appeased, but is always set on some novelty more marvellous and startling than anything which has preceded. Be content with a holy ministry which does not dazzle by its fireworks, but sheds a steady sunshine on the sacred page. Cultivate famil-

iarity with the grand, solid works of our English literature. Avoid the use of extravagant adjectives. Take an interest in the games of children; in the common round and daily task of servants and employés; in the toils and tears of working-girls; in the struggling lot of the charwoman who scrubs your floors, and the lad who cleans your boots. Do not be always gaping at the window for bands to come down the street; but be on the pavement before your house with a helping hand and kindly word for the ordinary folk that labour and are heavy-laden. It is remarkable that in all these there are tragedies and comedies; the raw material for novels and romances; the characters which fill the pages of a Shakespeare or George Eliot. All life is so interesting; but we need eyes to see, and hearts to understand. There has been no age greater than this; there is no part of the world more full of God than yours; there is no reason why you should not see Madonnas in the ordinary women, and Last Suppers in the ordinary meals, and Holy Families in the ordinary groups around you—if only you have the anointed eyes of a Raffaelle or a Leonardo da Vinci. If the world seems common or unclean to you, the fault lies in your eyes that have made it so.

Let us not disparage ourselves. We know our limitations; we are not capable of working miracles—our best friends are well acquainted with this, for no eyes are quicker than Love's. We are sparrows, not larks;

clay, not alabaster; deal, not mahogany. But if we cannot work miracles, we can speak true, strong words about Jesus Christ; we can bear witness to Him as the Lamb of God; we can urge men to repent and believe the Gospel. The world would have been in a sorry plight if it had depended entirely on its geniuses and miracle-workers. Probably it owes less to them than to the untold myriads of simple, humble, obscure, and commonplace people, whose names will never be recorded in its roll-call, but whose lives have laid the foundations on which the superstructure of good order, and government, and prosperity, has been reared.

Remember that God made you what you are, and placed you. Dare to be yourself—a simple, humble, sincere follower of Jesus. Do not seek to imitate this or the other great speaker or leader. Be content to find out what God made you for, and be that at its best. You will be a bad copy, but a unique original; for the Almighty always breaks the pattern from which He has made one case. Above all, speak out the truth, as God has revealed it to you, distorting, exaggerating, omitting nothing; and long after you have passed away, those who remember you will gather at your grave and say, "he did no miracle—there was nothing sensational or phenomenal in his life-work; but he spake true things about Jesus Christ, which we have tested for ourselves and are undeniable. Indeed, they led us to believe in Him for ourselves."

II. The ways in which We may bear Testimony to the Lord Jesus.—There is no miracle in your life, my reader. You are no genius; you do not know what it is to have the rush of thought, the power of brilliant speech, the burst of song. You have no wealth, only just enough for your bare sustenance, and nothing to spare. You have no rich blood in your veins, come of a line of heroes or saints. As you look daily into the common routine of your lot, it seems ordinary enough. Be it so; there is at least one thing you can do, as we have seen—like the Baptist, you may witness for Jesus.

Speak to others privately. When only two disciples were standing beside him, John preached the same sermon as he had delivered to the crowd the day before, and both of them went to the frail lodging where Jesus was making his abode. There is nothing that more deeply searches a man than the habit of speaking to individuals about the love of God. We cannot do it unless we are in living union with Himself. Nothing so tests the soul. It is easy to preach a sermon, when the inner life is out of fellowship with God, because you can preach your ideals, or avenge on others the sins of which you are inwardly conscious; but to speak to another about Christ involves that there should be an absolutely clear sky between the speaker and the Lord of whom he speaks. But as this practice is the most difficult, it is the most blessed in its reflex influence. To lead another to Jesus is to get nearer Him. To chafe the limbs of some frozen companion

is to send the warm blood rushing through your own veins. To go after one lost sheep is to share the shepherd's joy. Whether by letters addressed to relatives or companions, or by personal and direct appeal, let each one of us adopt the sacred practice, which Mr. Moody followed and commended, of allowing no day to pass without seeking to use some opportunity given by God for definite, personal dealings with others.

The apostle Andrew seems to have specially consecrated his life to this. On each of the occasions he is referred to in the Gospels he is dealing with individuals. He brought his own brother; was the first to seek after a boy to bring to the Saviour's presence; and at the close of our Lord's ministry he brings the seeking Greeks. Did he not learn this blessed art from his master, the Baptist?

It is requisite that there should be the deliberate resolution to pursue this holy habit; definite prayer for guidance as one issues from the morning hour of prayer; abiding fellowship with the Son of God, that He may give the right word at the right moment; and a willingness to open the conversation by some manifestation of the humble, loving disposition begotten by the Holy Spirit, which is infinitely attractive and beautiful to the most casual passer-by.

Speak experimentally. "I saw and bare record." John spoke of what he had seen, and tasted, and handled. Be content to say, "I was lost, but Jesus found me; blind, and He gave me sight; unclean, and

He cleansed my heart." Nothing goes so far to convince another as to hear the accent of conviction on the lips of one whose eyes survey the landscape of truth to which he allures, and whose ears are open to the eternal harmonies which he describes.

Speak from a full heart. The lover cannot but speak about his love; the painter can do no other than transfer to canvas the conceptions that entrance his soul; the musician is constrained to give utterance to the chords that pass in mighty procession through his brain. "We cannot but speak the things that we have seen and heard."

Does it seem difficult to have always a full heart? Verily, it is difficult, and impossible, unless the secret has been acquired of abiding always in the love of God, of keeping the entire nature open to the Holy Spirit, and of nourishing the inward strength by daily meditation on the truth. We must close our senses to the sounds and sights around us, that our soul may open to the unseen and eternal. We must have deep and personal fellowship with the Father and the Son by the Holy Ghost. We must live at first-hand on the great essentials of our faith. Then, as the vine-sap arises from the root, its throb and pulse will be irresistible in our behaviour and testimony. We shall speak true things about Jesus Christ. Our theme will be evermore the inexhaustible one of Christ—Christ, only Christ—not primarily the doctrine about Him, or the

benefits accruing from fellowship with Him, but Himself.

Thus, some day, at your burying, as men turn homewards from the new-made grave, and speak those final words of the departed, which contain the most unerring verdict and summing-up of the life, they will say, "He will be greatly missed. He was no genius, not eloquent nor profound; but he used to speak about Christ in such a way that he led me to know Him for myself: I owe everything to him. He did no miracle; but whatever he said of Jesus was true."

III. The Power of Posthumous Influence.—John had been dead for many months, but the stream he had set flowing continued to flow; the harvests he sowed sprang into mature and abundant fruitage; the wavelets of tremulous motion which he had started circled out and on.

How many voices are speaking still in our lives—voices from the grave! voices from dying beds! voices from books and sermons! voices from heaven! "Being dead, they yet speak." Let us live so that, when we are gone, our influence shall tell, and the accents of our voice linger. No one lives or dies to himself. Each grain on the ocean-shore affects the position of every other. Each star is needed for the perfect balance of the spheres. Each of us is affecting the lives of all that are now existing with us in the world, or will ex-

ist. To untold ages, what we have been and said will affect all other beings for good or ill. We may be forgiven for having missed our opportunities, or started streams of poison instead of life; but the ill effect can never be undone.

Parents, put your hands on those young childish heads, and say pure, sweet words of Christ, which will return to memory and heart long after you have gone to your reward! Ministers of religion, and Sunday school teachers, remember your tremendous responsibility to use to the uttermost the opportunity of saying words which will never die! Friend, be true and faithful with your friend; he may turn away in apparent thoughtlessness or contempt, but no right word spoken for Christ can ever really die. It will live in the long after years, and bear fruit, as the seeds hidden in the old Egyptian mummy-cases are bearing fruit to-day in English soil.

XVII

The Spirit and Power of Elias.

(Luke i. 17.)

"Oh, may I join the choir invisible
Of those immortal dead who live again
In minds made better by their presence: live
In pulses stirred to generosity;
In deeds of daring rectitude; in scorn
For miserable aims that end with self;
In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars,
And with their mild persistence urge man's search
To vaster issues."

GREAT men are God's greatest gifts to our race; and it is only by their interposition that mankind is able to step up to higher and better levels of life.

The doctrine of evolution is supposed to explain the history of the universe. Men would have us believe that certain forces have been set in motion which have elaborated this great scheme of which we are a part; and the evolutionist would go so far as to say that man himself has been evolved from protoplasm, and that the brains of a Socrates, of a Milton, or of any genius who has left his mark upon the world, have simply emanated from the whole process which cul-

minates in them. We believe, on the contrary, that at distinct points in the history of the universe, there has been a direct interposition of the will and hand of God; and it is remarkable that in the first chapter of Genesis that august and majestic word *create* is three times introduced, as though the creation of matter, the creation of the animal world, and the creation of man, were three distinct stages, at which the direct interposition of the will and workmanship of the Eternal were specially manifest. Similarly, we believe that there have been great epochs in human history, which cannot be accounted for by the previous evolution of moral and religious thought, and which must be due to the fact that God Himself stepped in, and by the direct raising up of a man, who became the apostle of the new era, lifted the race to new levels of thought and action. It is in this light that we view the two illustrious men who were, each in his own measure, the apostles of new epochs in human history —Elijah in the old Covenant, and John the Baptist in the new.

It is remarkable that the prophet Malachi tells us that the advent of the Messiah should be preceded and heralded by Elijah the prophet; and that Gabriel, four hundred years after, said that John the Baptist, whose birth he announced, would come in the spirit and power of Elijah. This double prediction was referred to by our Lord when, descending from the Mount of Transfiguration, in conversation with the apostles, He in-

dicated John the Baptist as the Elijah who was to come. And, indeed, there was a marvellous similarity between these two men, though each of them is dwarfed into insignificance by the unique and original personality of the Son of Man, who towers in inaccessible glory above them.

I. Let us institute a Comparison between Elijah the Tishbite, and John the Baptist.—They resembled each other in dress. We are told that Elijah was a hairy man—an expression which is quite as likely to refer to the rough garb in which he was habited, as to the unshorn locks that fell upon his shoulders. And John the Baptist wore a coarse dress of camel's hair.

Each of them sojourned in Gilead. In the remarkable sentence, which, for the first time, introduces Elijah to the Bible and the world, we are told that he was one of the sojourners in Gilead, that great tract of country, thinly populated, and largely given over to shepherds and their flocks, which lay upon the eastern side of the Jordan. And we know that it was there amid the shaggy forests, and closely-set mountains, with their rapid torrents, that John the Baptist waited, fulfilled his ministry, preached to and baptized the teeming crowds.

Each of them learnt to make the body subservient to the spirit. Elijah was able to live on the sparse food brought by ravens, or provided from the meal barrel of the widow; was able to outstrip the horses of Ahab's

chariot in their mad rush across the valley of Jezreel; and after a brief respite, given to sleep and food, went in the strength of it for forty days and nights, through the heart of the desert until he came to Horeb, the Mount of God. His body was but the vehicle of the fiery spirit that dwelt within; he never studied its gratification and pleasure, but always handled it as the weapon to be wielded by his soul. And what was true in his case, was so of John the Baptist, whose food was locusts and wild honey. The two remind us of St. Bernard, who tells us that he never ate for the gratification of taking food, but only that he might the better serve God and man.

We remember also that each of these heroic spirits was confronted by a hostile court. In the case of Elijah, Ahab and Jezebel, together with the priests of Baal and Astarte, withstood every step of his career; and in the case of John the Baptist, Herod, Herodias, and the whole drift of religious opinion, with its repeated deputations to ask who he might be, dogged his steps, and ultimately brought him to a martyr's end.

How distinctly, also, in each case there was the consciousness of the presence of God. One of the greatest words which man has ever uttered was that in which Elijah affirmed, in the presence of king Ahab, that he was conscious of standing at the same moment in the presence of the Eternal: "And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the sojourners of Gilead, said unto Ahab, 'As the Lord, the God of Israel, liveth, before whom I

stand'"—a phrase afterwards used by Gabriel himself when he told Zacharias that he was one of the presence angels. "And the angel answering, said unto him 'I am Gabriel that stand in the presence of God.'" This consciousness of the Divine presence in his life revealed itself in his great humility, that he cast himself on the ground with his face between his knees; and in the unflinching courage which enabled him to stand like a rock on Mount Carmel, when king, and priest, and people, were gathered in their vast multitudes around him, sufficient to daunt the spirit that had not beheld a greater than any. This God-consciousness was especially manifest in the Baptist, who referred so frequently to the nearness of the kingdom of God. "The kingdom of heaven," he said, "is at hand." And when Jesus came, unrecognised by the crowds, his high spirit prostrated itself, and his very visage was shadowed with the vail of intense modesty and humility, as he cried: "In the midst of you standeth One whom ye know not, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose."

Coupled with this sense of God, there was, in each case, a marvellous fearlessness of man. When Obadiah met Elijah, and was astonished to hear that the prophet was about to show himself to Ahab, Elijah overbore his attempts to dissuade him, saying: I will certainly show myself to thy master: go, tell him Elijah is here. And when afterwards the heavenly fire had descended, and the prophets of Baal were standing bewildered by

their altar, he did not flinch from arresting the whole crowd of them, leading them down to the valley of the Kishon brook beneath, and there slaying them, so that the waters ran crimson to the sea. This fearlessness was also conspicuous in the forerunner, who dared to beard the king in his palace, asserting that he must be judged by the same standard as the meanest of his subjects, and that it was not lawful for him to have his brother's wife.

To each there came moments of depression. In the case of Elijah, the glory of his victory on the brow of Carmel was succeeded by the weight of dark soul-anguish. Did he not cast himself, within twenty-four hours, beneath the juniper tree of the desert, and pray that he might die, because he was no better than his fathers—a mood which God, who pities his children and remembers that they are dust, combated, not by expostulation, but by sending him food and sleep, knowing that it was the result of physical and nervous overstrain? And did not John the Baptist from his prison cell send the enquiry to Jesus, as to whether, after all, his hopes had been too glad, his anticipations too great, and that perhaps after all He was not the Messiah for whom the nation was waiting?

Both Elijah and John the Baptist had the same faith in the baptism of fire. We never can forget the scene on Carmel when Elijah proposed the test that the God who answered by fire should be recognised as God; nor how he erected the altar, and laid the wood, and

placed the bullock there, and drenched the altar with water; and how, in answer to his faith, at last the fire fell. John the Baptist passed through no such ordeal as that; but it was his steadfast faith that Christ should come to baptize with the Holy Ghost and fire.

Each of them turned the hearts of the people back. It was as though the whole nation were rushing towards the edge of the precipice which overhung the bottomless pit, like a herd of frightened horses on the prairie, and these men with their unaided hands turned them back. It would be impossible for one man to turn back a whole army in mad flight—he would necessarily be swept away in their rush; but this is precisely what the expression attributes to the exertions of Elijah and John. The one turned Israel back to cry, Jehovah, He is God; the other turned the whole land back to repentance and righteousness, so that publicans and soldiers, Sadducees and Pharisees, began to confess their sin, put away their evil courses, and return to the God of their fathers.

Each prophet was succeeded by a gentler ministry. Elijah was sent from Horeb to anoint Elisha, who, for the most part, passed through the land like genial sunshine—a perpetual benediction to men, women, and children; whilst John the Baptist opened the door for the Shepherd, Christ, who went about doing good, and whose holy, tender ministry fell on his times like rain on the mown grass.

From the solitudes beyond the Jordan, as he walked

with Elisha, talking as they went, the chariot and horses of fire which the Father had sent for his illustrious servant from heaven, bore him homeward, whilst his friends and disciples stood with outstretched hands, crying: The chariot and horses of Israel are leaving us, bearing away our most treasured leader. In those same solitudes, or within view of them, the spirit of John the Baptist swept up in a similar chariot. As the headsman, with a flash of his sword, put an end to his mortal career, though no mortal eyes beheld them, and no chronicler has told the story, there must have been horses and chariots of fire waiting to convey the noble martyr-spirit to its God. The parallel is an interesting one—it shows how God repeats Himself; and, if time and space permitted, we might elaborate the repetition of a similar conception, either in Savonarola of Florence, or in Martin Luther, or John Knox, who had been baptized into the same Spirit, and inspired to perform the same ministry. That Spirit is waiting still —waiting to clothe Himself with our life; waiting to do in us, and through us, similar work for the time in which we live. What these men did far back in the centuries, it is probable that others will have to do before this dispensation passes utterly away. A man, or men, shall again rise up, who will tower over their fellows, who will speak and act in the spirit and power of Elijah—men like Edward Irving, but without the mistakes that characterised his heroic life. Perhaps some young life may be inspired by this page to yield

itself to God, so that it may be sent forth to turn back the hearts and lives of vast multitudes from their evil way, turning the heart of the fathers to their children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

II. Notice the Inferiority of these Great Men to the Lord.—Neither Elisha, the disciple of Elijah, nor the eloquent Apollos, the disciple of John the Baptist, would have dared to say of their respective masters what Philip and Andrew, Peter and Thomas, habitually said of Christ. Greatly as they revered and loved their masters, they knew that they were men like themselves; that their nature was made in the same mould, though, perhaps, of finer clay; that there were limitations beyond which they could not go, and qualities of mind and soul in which they were not perfected. They dared not to say of them, "My Lord and my God." They never thought of prostrating themselves at their feet in worship; they never appealed to them after their decease as able to hear and answer prayer from the heaven into which they had passed.

Neither of them had what Jesus so often referred to —the consciousness of an unique union with God; neither of them dared to affirm, as Jesus did, that he was the Son of God, in the sense that made the use of that term blasphemy; neither of them thought of anticipating a moment when he should be seen sitting at the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds; neither

of them dared to couple himself with Deity in the sublime and significant pronoun *we*—"We will come and make our abode with him." Neither of them would have dreamed of accepting the homage which Jesus took quite naturally, when men worshipped Him, and women washed and kissed his feet: and I ask how it could be that Jesus Christ, so essentially meek and lowly, so humble and unwilling to obtrude Himself, should have spoken and acted so differently, unless his nature had been separated by an impassable gulf from that of other men, however saintly and gifted? The very fact that these men, acknowledged amongst the greatest of our race, drew a line, and said: Beyond that we cannot pass; we are conscious of defilement and need; we require forgiveness and grace, equally with those to whom we minister—compels on our part the acknowledgment that Jesus Christ was all He claimed to be, and that He is worthy to receive glory, and honour, and riches, and power, and blessing; for He is Man of men, the second Man, the Lord from Heaven.

Neither of these dared to offer himself as the Comforter and Saviour of men. Elijah could only rebuke sin, which he did most strenuously; but he had no panacea for the sin and sorrow of his countrymen. He could bid them turn to God; and he did. But he could say nothing of any inherent virtue, or power, which could proceed from him to save and help. It was never suggested for a moment that he could act as mediator

between God and man, though he might be intercessor. And as for John the Baptist, though he deeply stirred the religious convictions of his countrymen, he could only point to One who came after him, and say: "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." But within six months after the commencement of his ministry, Jesus says: "Son, thy sins are forgiven thee"; "The Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sin"; "Daughter, thy sins, which are many, are forgiven thee: go in peace"; and presently: "This is the cup of the New Covenant in my blood, shed for many, for the remission of sins"; and again: "The Son of Man came to give his life a ransom for many." Tell me of any, either in the story of Elijah or of John the Baptist, to compare with these words, spoken by the lowest and humblest being that ever trod time's sands? Does that not indicate that He stood in a relationship to God and man which has never been realized by another?

Besides, neither of them introduced a new type of living. Their own method of life seemed to indicate that there was sin in the body, or sin in matter; and that the only way of holiness was by an austerity that lived apart in the deserts, dreading and avoiding the presence of men. That was a type of holiness which every great religious teacher has followed; for you remember that Buddha used to say that all the present is an illusion and a dream, while the realities await us

beyond. On the other hand, Jesus taught that the Redeemer was also the Creator; that there was nothing common or unclean in man's original constitution; that sin consisted not in certain actions, functions, or duties —but in man's heart, and will, and choice; and that if a man were only right there, all his nature and circumstances will become illumined and transfigured by the indwelling Spirit. Let it never be forgotten that Christ taught that God is not going to cancel the nature which He Himself has bestowed in all its human and innocent outgoings, but only to eliminate the self-principle which has cursed it—as you would wish to take small-pox from the body of the little child, or the taint out of the rotting flesh of the leper.

O Christ, Thou standest pre-eminent in thy unparalleled glory! Let Elijah and John the Baptist withdraw, but oh, do Thou tarry! To whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. All the prophets and kings of men without Thee will not suffice; but to have Thee is to have all that is strong, and wise, and good, gathered up into the perfect beauty of a man, with the Divine glory of the Infinite God.

III. How may we have that same Spirit?—John the Baptist came in the spirit and power of Elijah: that spirit and power are for us too. Just as the dawn touches the highest peaks of the Alps, and afterwards, as the morning hours creep on, the tide of light passes

down into the valley, so the Spirit that smote that glorious pinnacle Elijah, and that nearer pinnacle of the Baptist, is waiting to descend upon us.

We are all believers in Jesus; but have we all received the Holy Ghost since we believed? This was the first question put by the apostle Paul when he entered the little gathering of twelve men at Ephesus. With his incisive eagerness he said: "Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed?" And they replied, in effect: We heard from our master John, that Jesus of whom he spake would baptize with the Holy Ghost; but we have never heard whether He did so. John said He would; but whether He has done it or not, we have never been told.

"Not know it?" said the apostle; "not know it? It has been fulfilled certainly. From heaven, on His ascension, He poured the Spirit of Promise upon the Church. There is something better than the negative water, there is the positive fire; it is good to know Christ after the flesh; it is better to know Him after the Spirit: the promise of Joel has been fulfilled, and its fulness may be enjoyed by all who believe."

When they heard that, they were baptized a second time; and surely Paul, as he put his hand upon them one by one, may have said: This is the age of the Holy Spirit; the age of Pentecostal power; the age in which God Himself is prepared to anoint ordinary men for service, as He did Elijah and the Baptist. The Spirit

of God is prepared so to fill the human spirit that it shall become God-possessed; and so that the very power which rested on Elijah, and on the Baptist, may rest on you also: ye shall receive the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon you.

Thus those twelve unknown men opened their whole nature to receive the Spirit of God; and, as the result, a revival broke out in Ephesus of such magnitude, that the magic books were burned, and the trade of the silversmiths grievously injured.

The power of the Holy Spirit is for us all. He is prepared, not only to be within us for the renewal and sanctification of character, but upon us as upon the Lord at his baptism. He waits to empower us to witness for Jesus, to endure the persecution and trial which are inevitable to the exercise of a God-given ministry, and to bring other men to God. It would be well to tarry to receive it. It is better to wait for hours for an express train than to start to walk the distance; the hours spent in waiting will be more than compensated for by the rapidity with which the traveller will be borne to his destination. Stay from your work for a little, and wait for the ascended, glorified Redeemer, in whom the Spirit of God dwells. Ask Him to impart to you that which He received on your behalf. Never rest until you are sure that the Spirit dwells in you fully, and exercises through you the plenitude of his gracious power. We cannot seek Him at

the hand of Christ in vain. Dare to believe this: dare to believe that if your heart is pure, and your motives holy, and your whole desire fervent—and if you have dared to breathe in a deep, long breath of the Holy Spirit—that according to your faith so it has been done to you; and that you may go forth enjoying the same power which rested on the Baptist, though you may not be conscious of any Divine afflatus, though there may have been no stroke of conscious power, no crown of flame, no rushing as of the mighty wind.

God is still able to vouchsafe to us as large a portion of his Spirit as to the disciples on the day of Pentecost. We are not straightened in Him, but in ourselves. The power of his grace is not passed away with the primitive times, as fond and faithless men imagine; but his Kingdom is now at hand, and Christ, standing on the threshold of the century, waits to lead his Church to greater triumphs than she has ever known. Oh that He would hasten to come forth from his royal chambers! Oh that He would take his throne as Prince of the kings of the earth! Oh that he would put on the robe of his majesty, and assume the sceptre of his unlimited and almighty reign. Creation travails; the Bride and the Spirit invoke; the mind of man has tried all possible combinations of sovereignty, and in vain.

"O Lord Jesus Christ, who at thy first coming didst send thy messenger to prepare the way before Thee; grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries

may likewise so prepare and make ready thy way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; that, at thy second coming to judge the world, we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen."

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